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In reduced circumstances: aging and impoverished continental veterans in the young Republic

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In Loving Memory of my Grandparents,

John James Wallover (1914-2000) and Mary Fallon Wallover (1915-1996)
Abstract

This study explores the social, economic, physical, and familial experiences of a specific group of impoverished old people. Revolutionary War veterans’ old age was characterized by deprivation, and yet they were embraced by early American society. The Revolutionary War Pensions Acts of 1818 and 1820 awarded veterans and their families distinctive treatment as aged poor. The pension legislation was a benevolent response to increasing impoverishment among old patriots who midwived the birth of the republic. These veterans and their families with ties to Bucks County, Pennsylvania lacked strong ties to family, property, and occupation. Several factors contributed to the risk of poverty for these veterans and their families in later years: life experience, physical hindrances, marital status, and living arrangements. These veterans and their families had limited financial resources, owned little property, experienced a wide variety of chronic health conditions concurrently, and had a fluid set of family arrangements. Their legacy as Revolutionary War survivors, though, provided them social status in later life. In the early years of the republic, the pension program extolled the contributions of Continental Army veterans, who were venerated as a link to the young nation’s formative past. Government annuities categorized veterans and their families as worthy of assistance, distinguishing honored veterans and their families from other aged poor. Pension benefits provided a degree of security and relief from their deteriorating economic circumstances.
Introduction

Revolutionary veteran Thomas Corbitt was engaged in a fight for survival, except this struggle did not take place on a battlefield. Nor were those dependent on his services brother soldiers in the field. The entire Corbitt family was fighting for economic survival. Heavily indebted, Thomas Corbitt, a veteran of the Pennsylvania Line, sought a federal pension to remain economically viable. After Thomas’s death, his wife, Sarah, pursued a pension as well. Away from the fields of battle, thousands of revolutionary veterans similar to Thomas Corbitt battled against poverty in the postwar period.¹

The American Revolution is remembered in the popular imagination as a struggle for independence from the mother country, and, indeed, one of the Revolutionaries’ most powerful adversaries was the British army. After the revolutionary catharsis and dissolution of the imperial family, however, poverty was the “common enemy” aging veterans engaged, as indigence threatened many veterans of the Continental Army in the new republic. During the war, Continental soldiers were often subjected to material deprivations, exposed to “the dangers and toils” of unhealthy conditions, and survived dangerous battlefield engagements. The battlefield, though, “was not the only place where the soldier of the Revolution suffered.” When veterans “returned home...poverty followed him there.” Ex-soldiers “carved and scarred with the records of battles” often could not “provide a living for themselves” or their families. “The pains and privations” of the Revolutionary War, in many instances, took their toll and adversely affected veterans’ economic viability as they grew older. Financial difficulties, unemployment, underemployment, an incapacity to work, physical infirmities, and old age compounded their precarious economic position.²

As a chance for poor men to obtain moderate prosperity, the promise of Continental service often fell short; however, the distinction did ultimately earn respectability for themselves
and their families. While they may not have become men of means through Continental service, military service provided a distinguished position in the new nation. Veteranhood distinctly enhanced the cohort's social position, providing status in later life. The federal pension program fostered a social differentiation, whereby aging and impoverished veterans and their families, despite exhibiting all the distasteful trappings of those unable to support themselves—paupers with shaky livelihoods, the handicapped, transients, and individuals without strong family ties—were set apart from other "contemptible," dependent poor.

Despite what historian David Hackett Fischer found as a trend toward the displacement of the old at the turn of the nineteenth century, the pension program ennobled old veterans. Fischer contended that the aged were venerated in the seventeenth century only to be despised by the end of the eighteenth century. Fischer traced the exaltation of the aged (1607-1820), which succumbed to a "new set of ideas" that resulted in a "revolution in age relations" (1770-1820) coinciding with American independence. American society was from this point set on a "straight and stable" course toward the ascendancy of gerontophobia (1770-1970) and a cult of youth prevalent into our own time. With the revolutionary generation, the elderly were removed from positions of authority. Their advanced years became symbols of decay rather than honor. The United States presented itself as a young republic founded on revolutionary ideas. In such a society, the old had little place, and were viewed as standing in the way of growth and progress. Under republican principles, people of any age were ideally free and equal, and there was little reason to conform to the hierarchy of age. A once firmly established colonial gerontocracy gave way to a system that favored youth. 3

This was a key period on the cusp of a transformation in the history of the American elderly. In the early years of the republic, though, there was no evidence of pejorative perceptions or degradation in the young nation's treatment of these old veterans. Age usually afforded few benefits, but this group of elderly was honored as a distinctive class at the very
moment when American society supposedly moved inexorably toward gerontophobia. Aging veterans were not demeaned for their numerous years or derided because of the physical decline that accompanied old age. The new policy separated this specific population of older people from other needy groups. During a period of increased hostility toward dependency, the Continental veterans' ill fortune was a powerful image that resonated in the collective mythology, leading to public support for this uniquely defined class of older people in economic jeopardy. There was, then, no evident stigmatizing of this cohort of elderly and no negative characterization of these old.

Federal pensions helped alleviate serious hardship, and even if veterans and their families remained at considerable economic risk, the assistance program elevated recipients to a romanticized stature. Their indigence was purged of negative labeling as strolling poor and categorization as a social problem. As people eking out a living, they normally would have been placed among others at the smallest margin of subsistence—those permanently disabled, the elderly, the sick, and mothers with small children. Instead, through the pension program and in death, these paupers and elderly transcended deriding connotations as a potential cause of social disorder.

First, I will consider what historians have written about veteranhood, poverty, and old age, and then I turn to describe the project's methodology and define the terms used throughout this study. I then move to look at the background and provisions of the Revolutionary War Pension Applications to show the federal law and its amendments' significance to the history of veteranhood. Turning to the study's cohort, I place the social standing of the Bucks County veterans in the profile of the Continental Army. Next, the long-term costs of the Revolutionary War on the soldiery are treated. Moving to closely focus on the veterans' economic status in the postwar period, I examine their material living conditions. The following section looks at the changing nature of health experience in later life. After exploring how the multiple diseases and
disabilities undermined impoverished veterans' economic base, I analyze the economic circumstances of the sample. In the penultimate section, the study shifts to investigate household types, family support in later life, and the cohesiveness of family relationships. Finally, I conclude by weighing the efficacy of the pension program by examining the extent to which veterans and their families remained at considerable economic risk.

The plight of aging Continental veterans provides an opportunity to assess the harsh realities of poverty in a vibrant young nation. It permits an examination of the effects of economic deprivation on the constitution of hard-pressed families, and practices of support for the elderly, and yields an indication of how much property and status mobility veterans managed to achieve. Indeed, the prevalence of pauperism among destitute and physically infirm Revolutionary veterans lends stark contrast to a nascent republican society brimming with adolescent energy and strength.

**Historiography**

A sizeable number of Continental Army veterans were among the poor in the early national period, although their plight has usually been overlooked. Survivors of the Revolutionary War were the first to write about the inevitable problems of reentering civilian society. An introspective Joseph Plumb Martin, a New England Continental soldier, acerbically expressed the challenge of readjustment: “When the country had drained the last drop of service it could screw out of the poor soldiers, they were turned adrift like old worn-out horses, and nothing said about land to pasture them upon.” Martin’s embittered passage captures discharged soldiers’ resentment over the nation’s ingratitude toward their sacrifices and the stinginess of the severance settlement. Alexander Graydon, a captain born in Bristol, Bucks County, Pennsylvania wrote in his memoirs, “Those who had fought the battles of the country, at least in the humbler grades, had as yet earned nothing but poverty and contempt.”

5
The first historian of the Revolution, David Ramsay, observed that farmers, mechanics, merchants, and tradesmen returned to their tasks after the war; “privates generally betook themselves to labor, and crowned the merit of being good soldiers by becoming good citizens.” A mid-nineteenth century Whig interpretation of the revolutionary soldiery underscored their indefatigable character. George Bancroft expressed this interpretation in its purest form, suggesting that the Revolution was a heroic struggle in which hardy yeoman farmers and idealistic merchants and planters took arms to defend political liberty. He depicted veterans as “enthusiasts for liberty” who served with conviction and did “their duty to their native land and to mankind.” At the war’s end, the stalwart soldiers simply “retired to their homes.” This is where Bancroft’s treatment of Revolutionary War veterans concluded. In the mid-twentieth century, Dixon Wecter’s _When Johnny Comes Marching Home_ was one of the few studies that addressed social and cultural aspects of military service and devoted some attention to the postwar lives of Continentals.5

Recent works devoted to the social make-up of the army reveal a great deal about who fought in the war. Revisionist military historians, furthermore, have placed the war into the broader framework of social history by exploring the plight of the common soldier. The historiography of the army in the Revolutionary era, though, has suffered from a lack of attention to other social and cultural questions. There is a marked absence in the revolutionary historiography addressing the progress of veterans. Military historians and social historians have both largely overlooked the postwar lives of those who fought in the Revolutionary War.

Late twentieth-century studies began studying ex-soldiers’ postwar experience. The consensus has been that revolutionary soldiers “did not fare well economically” after the war. Edward C. Papenfuse and Gregory A. Stiverson’s study of the 308 men in General William Smallwood’s regiment concluded that the soldiers came from poverty. They presented a geographical and economic profile of Smallwood’s Maryland regiment, which was composed
largely of indentured servants, poor farm laborers, and convicts. Military service did nothing to end their poverty; they were just as impoverished after the war. Mark E. Lender and James Kirby Martin concluded that few soldiers were able to realize their goals of a freehold stake in the new Republic and most of the soldiers returned to civilian life as poor as they had been at enlistment. In his study of Virginia soldiers, Charles Sellers also concluded that most soldiers led paupers' lives after the war. In Alfred Young's richly detailed account of the life of veteran and poor shoemaker George Robert Twelves Hewes, he showed that Hewes was born into a lower socioeconomic family and continued to struggle in poverty after the war. These histories of soldiers move beyond battle tactics and leaders to assess the greater ramifications of war on the government, the community, and, in particular, individuals who served.⁶

Historian John Resch's *Suffering Soldiers* recently made a major contribution to the historical literature on American veterans and to several sub-fields of early American history, opening up a dialogue among scholars of the Revolutionary era and Early Republic. His work was the first extensive study to delve into the postwar lives of Revolutionary War soldiers. Offering a broad interdisciplinary approach, he employs several methodologies in tandem, most notably social and cultural history, to examine the transformation of political culture and public policy in the new nation viewed from the vantage point of the Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818. Resch produced a local-national study featuring, on the one hand, an analysis of Peterborough, New Hampshire's soldiers and their record of participation in the war, and, on the other hand, an examination of the political contest that resulted in passage of the 1818 Pension Act. In an effort to tie these two subjects together, Resch conducted a quantitative analysis of 877 randomly selected Revolutionary War pension files with the purpose of comparing the characteristics of Peterborough's soldiery to this larger sample of Continental veterans.⁷

Resch's functional definition of soldiers was fraught with serious methodological flaws that preclude comparisons with his findings. He included state and militia units in his analysis of
Revolutionary soldiers, which effectively weighted his Peterborough sample more toward the middle and upper ranks of that community's socioeconomic structure. Resch, furthermore, examined officers and enlisted men mixed together. In Revolutionary America, the military rank system was understood to reflect the social hierarchy, whereby officers were commonly prominent men in their communities. Class distinctions were inherent in eighteenth-century military service. Imitating their European counterparts, revolutionaries believed that military distinctions should be reinforced by social ones. The regular army's highest ranking senior officers came from the most prominent stations of early American society. Junior officers were more likely to come from the upper middling and middling sort. Struggling professionals, fairly successful merchants, artisans, shopkeepers, and their sons sought to enhance their status by availing themselves to the prestige of officership. Continental officers aspired to genteel status, and elites typically saw service as common privates as beneath their social station. Thus, it is not surprising that the exploration of both officers and enlisted men showed the army as a "cross-section" of society. Other quantitative studies revealed that enlisted men's social status tended to be lower than that of their officers.8

Over the past few decades, an impressive body of scholarship has emerged on the United States' war veterans and their impact on the nation. One particularly fruitful field of inquiry has been the role of veterans in the development of the American welfare state. The development of the first Federal pension system has been considered from the general perspective of social policy. Theda Skocpol regarded the Revolutionary pension system as a modest beginning and the first federal legislation of social policy. Congress initially granted pensions for disabled soldiers, and only ex-soldiers in dire need were considered under the 1818 pension program. She argued that by the Jacksonian era, the 1836 pension act for widows marked a tendency that would characterize American social-legislation—charitable in spirit and aimed at helping mothers.9
The research conducted and the findings in the other relevant fields of history that relate to impoverished veterans sheds light on the direction of this study. New social history generated a surge of interest in the extent of poverty in early American cities. It has manifested itself partly in general studies of economic mobility and the distribution of wealth, and partly in more concentrated attention on the poor. Research on the poor has resulted in a number of important theses and monographs, including case studies by Raymond Mohl, John Alexander, and Priscilla Ferguson Clement and comparative studies by Gary B. Nash. These works are mainly concerned with aggregate dependency as a social and economic indicator and with the response of the well-to-do to the increase in poverty around them. Characterizations of the poor have generally been based on literary sources, supplemented by fragmentary data from public records. 10

This study of Revolutionary War veterans belongs to a similar line of inquiry but is different in its focus and its methods. The primary concern of this work is the economic situation of later-life poor families from a largely rural area and the nature of relationships among family members. Its methods are influenced by demographic studies of seventeenth-century towns and the aforementioned mobility studies of nineteenth-century cities. Impoverished veterans and their families in the early nineteenth century afford an exceptional opportunity for this kind of research because of the range and quality of documents generated by precedent-setting federal military pension acts. 11

Historians largely agreed with David Hackett Fischer's account of the relatively high status of many of the old, while disagreeing about its extent, strength, or duration. In general, American historians interpret positively attitudes toward the aged in the early periods, finding the elderly at least respected and often revered. Some have modified this golden age notion of old age in the seventeenth century, but most agree that the status of the elderly declined. Most American studies find that darker days followed the halcyon years, concluding that the elderly had suffered significant declines in status but disputed the exact timing of the transition from one
era to the other. Although disagreeing about its exact timing, American historians do not
generally relate this attitudinal change to industrialization. Andrew Achenbaum believed that
pre-Civil War Americans revered their elders. From then until World War I, the growth of
organizations and bureaucracy, not industrialization, obviated the need for the wisdom of the
aged and “accentuated their handicaps.” Carole Haber found the late nineteenth century a
watershed, when, among other things, old age was seen as an illness. She argued, however, for
more attention to eighteenth-century thought. The colonial period may have featured cultural
veneration of the aged, but, in her view, their position may in fact have been more precarious than
such veneration would seem to imply.12

Aside from the relative position of the aged, there has been no systematic study of the
elderly’s role within the family in the past. A few works place the elderly within the family
context. But the more prominent studies focused on the history of the aging generally address
societal attitudes, mentioning family and kin only tangentially. The emergence of research on the
life course has drawn attention to large areas for historians of the family to analyze, including
material on life expectancies, retirement, family support, and attitudes toward the aged. As study
of the elderly in the past increases and more cohort studies are undertaken, questions about
economic issues (occupation, wealth, retirement), social concerns (affective and instrumental
relationships, power, isolation), and physical well-being (health, sexuality) should receive more
attention.

There continues to be a gap in the historical understanding of revolutionary veterans’
postwar problems and adjustments to civilian life. Whereas studies have been devoted to other
war veterans—Civil War veterans, the “shell shocked” veterans of the Great War, the “greatest
generation” of veterans from the Second World War, and the so-called neglected veterans of
Vietnam—very little is known about the postwar experiences of the men who fought in the War
of Independence, or what might be termed the history of Revolutionary War veteranhood.13
Building upon an ever-burgeoning literature, this study examines the family lives of impoverished and aging Continental Army veterans in the new republic. My main purpose is not to do what other historians have already done, namely identifying soldiers as poorer than their officers. Rather, I seek to elucidate the intimate world of deprived households and later life experiences of men from deprived circumstances who occupied a special moment on the stage of history. Their exploits on the battlefield made textbooks, but there is a lesser-known chapter.

Research Design

This study is about common people who participated in the American Revolution. Its focus is on the struggles of an aged population of impoverished veterans in the new republic. Looking at some of the physical, demographic, and economic circumstances of a very specific group of white laboring people, permits an assessment and appreciation of what implications such an impoverished status had on material standards, family lives, and personal experiences in later years. The uncertainty and instability that marked the material existence of poverty-stricken laboring veterans extended to their family lives as well, influencing the size and composition of their households and the nature of their interpersonal relationships; economic circumstances shaped and were shaped by families.

The topic of impoverished veterans allows for an understanding of the history of the indigent—a class of people often ignored by professional scholars. By studying these people it is possible to learn more about the existence of the flotsam of early American society—those in abject poverty and those at the edges of poverty. The aim is to ask certain questions about the family in past time and view old age and poverty in one particular setting. The nature of interpersonal relations among family members, a considerably elusive topic, will also be explored. Beyond economic health, the study also considers the physical condition of the aged poor. Since a strong presence of age-related limitations in physical functioning prevented many
from sustaining themselves, this study will turn to consider what implications physical disability, underemployment, and indigence held for living arrangements and family relationships.

The large proportion of aging veteran-headed families were not particularly healthy, settled, or stable, often leading them to seek help outside of the family. Their special status, then, did not necessarily guarantee a revered position in the family. While veterans and their families adopted a wide variety of living arrangements, the evidence suggests that there was a high rate of solitary households and demonstrable failing of many kinship support networks. As a social institution and organizational structure, the family provides a vehicle for studying changes in residence and migration patterns, household size, life expectancy, age relations within the family, and the development cycle of households, that is, changes in household composition over time.

The objective of this collective biography is to understand better the family lives of white laboring people with ties to Bucks County, Pennsylvania (see Maps 1 and 2 in the Appendix), detailing the structure of their households and the nature of the relationships among family members. Cohort analysis has been used to collect data relevant to the study of governmental policy, veteranhood, poverty, health, and the family. The collective portrait limned from the Revolutionary War Pension Application Files, tax lists, census schedules, and wills is meant to evoke the fabric of the lives of average early Americans, and seeks to understand their personal world to better understand early America "from the bottom up." Almost four decades ago, historian Jesse Lemisch called for a view of the revolutionary experience that would be sensitive to the experience of marginal people—the impoverished and illiterate—those who did not give speeches, write letters and diaries, or serve in public office. An understanding of these common people enriches our knowledge of early American society and yields insight into the fabric of life among the lower orders.

Poverty, like crime and insanity, was part of the fabric of early American society.

Indeed, the social problem of poverty has been deeply rooted in the American past. Examining
the problems afflicting the poor, and their effects on family life and the nature of relationships among family members, this study looks at poverty as it affected family, considering the effect of wealth on household size. Monetary problems undoubtedly helped define family lives, and the size and composition of poor, senescent households are analyzed and described. Probably no institution in early America was as important to the well-being of both individuals and society as the family. Families were the center of economic activity in an agricultural society. Indeed, families in early America were central in the affairs of every individual. Focusing on these impoverished veterans and their later-life families, this project examines the nature of households among the poorer elements of society—how they were organized and what they did to and for their members. In the absence of any welfare system, families took care of the sick, elderly, and orphaned. Even single people were traditionally placed in a family when they needed help. In particular, this study focuses upon a group within the family—the dependent elderly—whose characteristics and circumstances are often overlooked as subject matter.

The dimensions of poverty are explored here by looking at young enlisted men of the Continental Army as aging impoverished veterans. This exploration relies on the linkage between the Revolutionary War Pension Application Files and public records of thirty-seven veterans of the Continental establishment. Many characteristics shape the research methods of family scholars. There is no single paradigm for doing research, with the result that family scholars must be versed in multiple methodologies. The unit of analysis, that is, the smallest unit about which a family scholar draws a conclusion, may be an individual (child, mother), a dyad (husband and wife, siblings), a family (nuclear), a kinship system, a social network, a culture, a historical cohort (Generation X, post-World War II Baby Boomers), or a historical period (colonial American family values). A cohort is defined as an age group that has shared common historical experiences. In this respect, a cohort is different from a generation. A generation may consist of several cohorts, each of whom has encountered different historical experiences that
have affected its life course. A cohort of Continental Army veterans who enlisted in, resided in, or moved to Bucks County is used here to explore the personal lives of the nonelite element in Revolutionary and early national society. The veteran cohort will be compared and contrasted to nonpensioned white male heads of household from Bucks County aged forty-five and above. Both family size and wealth will be compared to measure any differences or similarities between these groups.

The aging veteran population was poor, physically infirm, ill housed, and often socially isolated. Information about these veterans is drawn largely from the Revolutionary War Pension Application Files. The data provide an opportunity to look at how veterans fared after the war and to explore the circumstances of ex-soldiers after the Revolution. As a historical source, the pension applications are a significant and little explored treasure-trove of information on early American lower orders.

Only recently a number of historians have begun to appreciate the richness of this material for reconstructing the lives of a broad spectrum of people who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century. The estimated 80,000 separate files range in size from a single bounty-land warrant card to hundreds of documents, and can include a wide variety of materials within the files. These documents, illustrative of the lives of ordinary Americans, are still one of the most useful but least used sources for the study of family and social history of the early nineteenth century. The pension applications preserve documentary evidence for the vast majority of individuals who left no diaries, few wills, and few literary records—indeed, few records of any kind. Such details can be used to reinforce and elaborate on the information from the early censuses, taxes, and wills.

Careful, qualitative studies of household relations should be used in conjunction with quantitative census data on living arrangements. Doing so provides a richer understanding of the impact that living arrangements had on the elderly. Also, Bucks County offered a relatively full
set of tax records for the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but regrettably, limitations within this source of information still do not make for easy identification of the poor’s experience. A study of these pensions, together with census schedules, tax lists, and wills and administration records, can provide the answers to such questions as how solvent later-life families were, how many children impoverished people had, how long impoverished people lived, how much control fathers had over their children, and to what extent and under what conditions children remained in their parents’ household. The answers to such questions enable historians to reconstruct to some extent the basic characteristics of family life for specific families in their communities.

Definitions

Poverty was a salient feature among the sample of veterans late in life. Referring to a class of people with little income and few material possessions, the word describes people’s lack of economic resources for consumption of economic goods and services, such as food, housing, and clothing. Thus, a poverty standard is based on a level of family resources (or, alternatively, of families’ actual consumption) deemed necessary to obtain a minimally adequate standard of living. There are many other forms of deprivation. One could be deprived of social well-being, for instance, one could be socially isolated; and one can lack physical well-being, for example, one can have a chronic disease or disabling condition. Poverty was a circumstance defined by a set of specific conditions that were considered to reflect economic deprivation. One could be said to be in poverty if one’s resources were below a threshold level for needed economic consumption. Veterans self-defined themselves as impoverished and were verified as such by the federal government’s eligibility requirements (see discussion on pensions below).

Economic poverty refers to a circumstance defined by a low level of material goods and services or a low level of resources to obtain those goods and services. For the purposes for this
study, economic deprivation is understood as the underlying concept of poverty. In 1776, Adam Smith linked economic poverty to the want of "necessities," which he defined as "not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without." This concept of poverty as insufficient resources for basic living needs accords with traditional public concerns for the needy. Commonly, such a concept is translated into a dollar level that is deemed adequate to obtain necessary goods and services. Beyond a statistically established poverty line, though, the destitute could be more than quantifiably poor and lacking in economic power. This study will explore what it meant to be economically deprived. 14

The term family can be defined in a number of different ways. The word is closely associated with household, which refers to a domestic unit of parents, children, or servants, all of whom were engaged in common economic activity under the control of a single head. In addition, there are various categories of households. Solitary households referred to widowers, veterans separated from their families, or unmarried veterans. Nuclear households contained a husband, wife, and children. Conjugal households composed only a husband and a wife. Extended households are divided even further: the presence of an older relative, the presence of a younger relative other than offspring, or the bonding of conjugal or nuclear units into one household. The family, by contrast, is defined as that group of individuals related by blood or marriage. Extended kin were also part of the family and could be called on to help in time of trouble. Each family, like other social groups, was subject to change over time, and this study examines a specific stage in a family’s evolution when it was economically vulnerable and prone to poverty. Was the family a major resource to its older members or were these specific families unwilling or unable to care for their frail elderly members? Almost by definition the history of the aged is importantly connected to the history of the family. Specifically, how has age had a direct impact on the American family? The composition and characteristics of senescent
households in the early national period are examined to consider how the physical and economic condition of aging parents affected family behavior. In early America physical aging helped mark the nebulous entrance into old age. The passage into old age has had no agreed-upon clear beginning other than noticeable physical deterioration, especially in motor or intellectual performance of a person beyond the threshold of adulthood. Life-cycle stages were often very loosely defined in the past, for age-grading in years was limited in importance and approximate birth dates were largely acceptable until the rise of regular registration of vital data. The idea that old age was a functional rather than a chronological condition was supported by markers such as loss of employment, death of spouse and friends, dependence, and decrepitude. Yet from the medieval period down to the twentieth century, illustrations of life stages have depicted a fifty-year-old on a plateau, with those younger on ascending steps and those older descending (see Illustrations 1 and 2). Life stages have proceeded in chronological order even if they have not begun at a given age. In the twentieth century, government pensions and social security insurance have become effective at specific ages, a widely accepted signal of the start of old age.

Old age was usually linked to the physical condition of people, as early American society generally adopted a functional attitude toward the process of growing old. Aging was measured, in part, by numbers, but also by the survival (or decline) of inherent capacity. The description of a person as aged was based in his or her physical appearance and general health, not simply on calendar years. Definitions based solely on a chronological age group are obviously inadequate; depending on their work, health, and life experiences, people age at different rates.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, it was necessary to establish an arbitrary age for comparisons between veterans and nonpensioners. In the analysis below, an age of forty-five to fifty was used to identify an aging person. Because the 1820 federal census's last category for male heads of household was forty-five years of age and up, that age was used to identify when...
adulthood flowed into old age and became the cut-off, for comparing households. The age figure is not too low considering that as late as 1790, when the first federal census was taken, less than twenty percent of the American population survived from birth to the age of seventy. The proportion of the over sixty population was less than two percent in late eighteenth-century America; by 1830 about four percent of the white population was sixty and older. Old persons, then, were not rare but people had to overcome many obstacles to live to old age. The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601, which endured for over two centuries and forms to this day the basis of local welfare programs in the Anglophone world, supports the appropriateness of the age figure for the early modern period. By the time of the Old English Poor Law, the age of fifty appears to have been used as a threshold of old age in many English communities. Beyond chronological spans, moreover, this cohort of veterans was physically aged.  

People age at different rates and both biological and psychosocial factors must be taken into account in defining old age. Biological age is the anatomical or physiological age of a person, as determined by changes in organismic structure and function; such a consideration takes into account such features as strength and sensory acuity. Biology does not act alone in affecting the aging process. Psychological, social, and economic factors interact with biology in determining the nature and rapidity of aging. Experiential variables, then, affect the rate and degree of decline. Poor nutrition and disease caused certain conditions thought to be due to aging. Furthermore, the loss of a loved one, or meaningful roles and activities—events that were likely to occur in old age—could precipitate physical and psychological decline or exacerbate an existing illness at any time of life.

Most social scientists recognize retirement as a pivotal transition in the family life cycle as well as in the individual life course. It has been assumed that most early Americans worked until they wore out—scarcely anyone retired. The widely held belief that in the past all men without private income worked as long as they were physically able has undergone revisions.
John Demos found, for example, that although older people cut back on work in colonial America, only a germ of modern retirement existed. Through the 1700s and mid-1800s retirement was rather uncommon and about seventy percent of older men remained in the labor force. Many of these older workers held high status and prestigious positions. The aged were valued for their wisdom and experience and forced retirement was not supported by the social ideology of the time.

Also, the term soldier is very elastic and needs clarification. The subjects of this thesis were all enlisted men from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, who served in the Continental Army. It is helpful to give general definitions of the varying services to distinguish and more clearly outline the subjects under consideration in this study. These Continental soldiers were regular troops who composed the Pennsylvania Line, the Continental Artillery, and cavalry. These were the professional soldiers of the Revolution who formed a national army under the authority of the Continental Congress. Men served relatively long tours—anywhere from six months to the duration of the war. In contrast, the Pennsylvania government (usually on a county-wide level) raised and directed the militia and other state troops. These men were the “citizen-soldiers” of the war, raised during times of local emergency, usually for no longer than three months.

There were significant differences between these types of Revolutionary War military service. Indeed, the contrasts in outlooks, social status, and expectations, particularly between regulars and militiamen, are well known. Continental troops tended to be the poorest of all soldiers and often served out-of-state for long periods. Conversely, militia members were concerned with local defense and were in arms for far shorter tours. For the purposes of this study, the term soldier is defined narrowly, focusing only on those indigent veterans who were eligible for federal pensions in 1818 and 1820 because of their service in the Continental establishment—America’s first regular army.
Revolutionary War Pensions

The changing restrictions in the legislation responsible delineated who was eligible to receive payments, how that eligibility might be proved, and determined the nature of historical evidence in the vast body of records. Specifically, understanding the legislation's features will highlight the kinds of documents generated by the 1818 and 1820 pension acts employed in this study.

Pensions for military service, whether awarded to a veteran or to the family, fell into two broad general categories: invalid pensions, based on disability of a soldier caused by his service in the armed forces, and service pensions, based on some degree of service. Congress enacted invalid pension legislation in the early days of the war, providing half pay in 1776 for officers and servicemen disabled in military service. The pension promised a small income to veterans of land and sea service incapable of supporting themselves as a result of injuries. In addition, in 1778, those officers agreeing to remain in service for the duration of the war and for seven years more were to receive half pay (changed in 1783 to five years' full pay). In 1780, pensions were provided for widows or orphans of Continental Army officers (but not enlisted men) who had enlisted for the war and the seven additional years. This early legislation, though, was largely designed to encourage enlistment, and it affected relatively few persons. 19

The pension program evolved and increasingly expanded over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. After 1789, the federal government gradually took responsibility for invalid pensions from the states. Federal acts in 1793, 1803, 1806, and 1808 increased coverage for invalid pensions. In 1816, for example, 185 officers and 1,572 enlisted men received a total of $120,000 in invalid pensions for revolutionary service. Thirty-five years after the conclusion of the war, in March 1818, a Democratic Republican president, James Monroe, proposed legislation granting lifetime pensions to all Revolutionary War veterans who had served at least
nine months in the Continental Army and who were in “need of assistance from their country.” With the country in the midst of a postwar economic boom and an unexpected surplus in the treasury, both houses of Congress passed by overwhelming majorities the Revolutionary War Pension Act. In a burst of patriotic rhetoric, trumpeting, “Let us show the world that Republics are not ungrateful,” Congress approved “an act to provide for certain persons engaged in the land and naval service of the United States in the revolutionary war.” Congressional pension advocates were responding to a public outpouring of sentimentality toward Revolution veterans, which was part of a swelling national spirit following the War of 1812.

The Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 was, in essence, a new kind of public policy. Attempting for the first time to reward veterans rather than entice men to enlist, Congress granted half pay to all Continental officers and enlisted men, to members of the United States naval service, and to marines, if they were in need of financial assistance. The 1818 Pension Act, then, became the first indigent pension law—a measure to salvage them from destitution. The bill provided ninety-six dollars a year for privates and two hundred and forty dollars annually for officers who served at least nine months in a Continental line and who were “in reduced circumstances.”

To receive this payment, each applicant had to swear or affirm, before a court near his residence, to what unit he belonged while in service and when he had entered and left the service. The documents in the pension file resulting from this law consist of court depositions of veterans and their friends and families swearing to their service, an occasional official paper submitted as proof of honorable discharge at the conclusion of the war, letters from officers attesting to the service claimed, and the obligatory oath that the veteran had served “against the common enemy” and was in need of the assistance of his country. Most of the testimony was oral, recorded in the script of the court stenographers, and much of it signed only by the applicant’s mark.
Congress thought that the program would be brief and inexpensive. Supporters of the 1818 act had assured its opponents that only a few needy veterans of the revolution still survived and that no more than a few thousand would apply for the law's benefits. A flood of applicants, however, completely overwhelmed the War Department, and in February 1823, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun reported to the Senate that 18,800 claimants were admitted to the pension rolls under the 1818 act. Pension payments in 1818, primarily to invalids eligible under older laws, totaled $105,000; in 1819 payment expenditures were $1,811,000. By 1820 the unexpected demand led to an amendment in the law to reduce cost and deter fraud.\textsuperscript{21}

The supplementary act of 1820 stiffened the poor law provision with the addition of a means test that required applicants to submit a certified schedule of personal property and income. Congress appropriated $2,766,000 for fiscal 1820, but in the face of declining revenues during the Panic of 1819, decided to reevaluate its policies, and on May 1, 1820, adopted a substantial revision to the 1818 act. The revised act combined pension and poor-law features to reward and assist indigent Continental Army veterans. Veterans would now be required to prove their need for a pension; all payments under the 1818 act were suspended until each applicant reappeared in court with a schedule “containing his whole estate and income (his necessary clothing and bedding excepted),” whereupon he was required to take an oath that the list included 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 received a copy of the disposition and determined whether the veteran was “in his opinion, in such indigent circumstances as to be unable to support himself without the assistance of his country.” All others were stricken from the rolls, with the exception that former invalid pensioners thus removed from the general pension list could be reinstated on the basis of their disability. By September 4, 1822, the pension rolls had been reduced to 12,331 veterans, and Secretary of War Calhoun steadfastly interpreted the law to mean that any individual thus removed from the rolls could not subsequently be reinstated. With a fuller
treasury restoring their compassion, Congress passed an act on March 1, 1823, allowing the Secretary of War to restore the benefits of veterans who, subsequent to removal from the list, had fallen below the War Department’s poverty level, established by regulation in 1826 at $300 worth of property. Nevertheless, for the next decade, proof of poverty remained the basis of eligibility for a service pension. Flush with a budgetary surplus, the federal government became the almoner for thousands of impoverished veterans. The acts of 1818 and 1820 created the first federal policy to grant direct relief to a group of poor people. It would remain the largest federal program of direct relief until the New Deal.  

One effect of these laws was to increase greatly the volume of testimonial evidence in the pension files. In addition to the newly required property schedules, there were also added substantial depositions detailing the length and type of military service, as a diligent War Department examined eligibility more rigorously. Veterans submitted letters, copies of deeds of gift, bills of sale, and court decisions relating to indebtedness to prove that transfer of property had not been intended to defraud the government by making the veteran eligible for a pension. Medical records were even added to some files, as former invalid pensioners no longer eligible for service pensions because of their wealth were returned to the invalid rolls and were required to submit to biannual medical examination by two surgeons or physicians.

The continued expansion of the federal revenues during the early Jacksonian period stimulated a renewal of efforts to make service alone, rather than need, the basis for Revolutionary War pensions. On June 7, 1832, Congress granted all remaining veterans of any Revolutionary military service, including militiamen and state troops, unrestricted pensions. The 1832 act was the first comprehensive pension law, providing a yearly grant to every man who had served for six months or more. This act gave full pay for life to all citizens (foreign officers excluded) who had served for at least two years in any military unit. Those who had served less than two years, but more than six months, were entitled to receive proportionately smaller
pensions. To be eligible under the more liberal 1832 act, soldiers no longer had to be disabled or poor, and service in any military organization was satisfactory, as long as service could be proved beyond a reasonable doubt. The only real requirements for those applicants were to either produce documentation of service or to state their unit, officers, how, when, and where they enlisted, and to name any battles in which they participated. The series of Revolutionary War Pension Acts thus included the first national poor law legislation, the first federally legislated welfare program, and the first federal pensions for all soldiers with significant service, which paved the way for the government to grant compensation for military service in all subsequent wars.23

No further fundamental changes occurred in pension laws for the veterans themselves. Under this expanded eligibility, by February of 1833, an additional 24,000 claims for pensions had been presented to the Pension Bureau. In the fall of 1834, fifty-one years after the Treaty of Paris ended the war, approximately 40,000 pensioners were on the rolls, or nearly twenty-two percent of those who had enlisted for Continental, state, and militia service.24

The final series of legislative acts that brought a substantial number of new pension recipients onto the rolls dealt with the question of the obligation of the nation to the widows of veterans. The 1832 act had allowed widows and orphans to collect the portion of a pension unpaid at the time of a veteran’s death. Subsequent congressional acts in the 1830s and 1840s gradually extended benefits under strict limitations until acts in 1853 and 1855 made all widows, whenever married, eligible for pensions if their husband would have met eligibility requirements under the 1832 act. This legislation added 22,600 widows’ pensions to the rolls, as many veterans who did not live to file claims themselves were survived by newly eligible widows. Overall, the Pension Bureau estimated in 1915 that total costs for Revolutionary War pensions amounted to approximately $70 million, of which as estimated $20 million was paid to surviving widows.25
The pension records contain a cache of data on aging, poor survivors of the Revolutionary War and their households. The data in the 1818 and 1820 applications include an inventory of real and personal property, valuation for each item, and a court-assessed total value of the applicant's property. The applications also provide information about the claimant's income, debts, occupation, age, and disabilities. In addition, applicants often provided the names, ages, and disabilities of all persons in the household and disclosed sources of charity. The amount and variety of data in the pension application files vary from case to case and reflect the law under which the applicant sought recourse. Service data include rank, organizations, terms of service, the names of officers with whom the applicant had served, and battles in which he had fought. Wounds and capture were also frequently noted. Personal data include age and social status as indicated by military rank and stated occupation. Economic data, for those who in 1820 were required to submit property lists, are quite detailed, including the amount of land held, the extent of improvement, and a listing of livestock, tools, and implements. Many property lists recorded meticulously the number and condition of household items. Each list contains the court-assessed value of all property, real and personal, excluding only "necessary clothing and bedding." The records, moreover, are rich in detail, providing substantive information and concrete data on population mobility, occupational patterns, poverty, and health. The data and details in the pension application files are documented in few other bodies of source material.

Taken individually, data on enlisted men are intriguing glimpses of the Revolutionary generation. Analyzed collectively, they comprise an important composite portrait of how aging poorer people fared in the new nation. The claims made under the 1818 and 1820 Revolutionary War Pension Act produced a national survey of poverty conditions experienced by a large number of elderly white men and their households. A sample study of claimants and their households who sought relief under the act is possible through the information contained within the applications of 1818 and 1820.
Like any historical data, the pension records must be used cautiously. The percentage of Revolutionary America’s population documented is, by modern sampling standards, remarkably large, but the group is not entirely representative. Civilians of the Revolutionary era, except for widows and orphans, were not eligible. The war itself and the subsequent forty-years had already weeded out the less healthy and the older soldiers.

Yet, because of the detailed information collected about ordinary people, the pension rolls present an unusual opportunity to study poverty in the early nineteenth-century. The Revolutionary War Pension Application Files tell historians who the destitute were, how they survived, and why they needed help. The depositions are a remarkable register of human misfortune during the early nineteenth century. A major critique of early studies of household structures was their reliance in snapshots in the census household schedules. For the historian, pension applications are a vast, largely untapped body of demographic source material that precedes the informative census of 1850 by more than a half a century. Veterans and their widows traced their individual family histories over time and place as periodic decennial censuses cannot do. Recapturing features of the inner workings of poor white families from the extant records is very challenging. The evidence contained in the pensions affords historians an unusually intimate glimpse into impoverished early American households. Few historians have focused on the indigent as individuals, preferring instead or forced by source limitations to examine upper class accounts written about them. Pensions, supplemented with other public records, serve as the foundation for this study of poverty and provide a chance to analyze closely the condition of the elderly in a particular historical period and gain a better feel for the texture of their lives.

At the turn of the nineteenth century the presence of poverty was increasingly seen “as symptomatic of a basic flaw in the citizen or the society, an indicator of personal or communal failing.” Yet, there was no evidence in federal policy on veterans’ pensions that poverty was

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perceived as a social problem, or that this group of poor were feared and needed to be controlled. These veterans fit the traditional definitions of poor—the disabled, aged, and abandoned, who were still largely cared for within a familial social system. Moreover, the federal poor law assumed, prima facie, that every Continental soldier was worthy of aid, so the only question to be answered was whether he needed it. By passing the War Department’s means test, the veteran was transformed from an alms seeker into an honored pensioner with a guaranteed annual income for life. Historian John Resch argued that the 1818 act and the subsequent 1820 revision solidified the image of the “suffering soldier” as the embodiment of Revolutionary virtue. Pension depositions revealed veterans describing both their selfless service and the “reduced circumstances” that plagued them after the war. The stigma of pauperism and poor relief was successfully divorced from the pensions by their clearly honorific intent. While veterans themselves helped create the image that facilitated the pension acts, the laws and their execution conversely consolidated the former soldiers’ view of self as part of the popular memory of the American Revolution.27

The sanitized poverty program and prestige bestowed upon Continental veterans was all the more distinctive considering the prevalence of antimilitary sentiment in postrevolutionary America. In the popular mind, the revolution was “a people’s war won by a virtuous citizenry” serving in militia units. Over time, the public came to imagine the Continental Army as a special regular force that was composed of the people at large. It was not until the first few decades of the nineteenth century that this image took hold in the popular American imagination. Traditional Anglo-American fears of a standing army, imagined as paid professionals who were dangerous to the liberties of the people, inhibited the celebration of the Continental Army. Many Americans preferred to cling to traditional beliefs that the militia, the supposed true citizen soldiers of the republic, were the morally superior military institution. But after 1815, Americans increasingly “conceived the war as a people’s war won by the Continental Army.” Key to this
shift in public opinion, John Resch asserted, was the image of the suffering soldier. By the
1810s, army veterans had grown old, frail, and frequently impoverished. Sympathy for the aging
veterans, combined with the nationalist feeling that swept the nation after 1815, changed public
memory of the war. Rather than viewing pensions as symbols of privilege or the fruits of
corruption, Americans began to see them as a proper and necessary way to repay the debt of
gratitude the nation owed to those who had fought and suffered to create it. The new image
regarded the pension as an expression of the nation’s gratitude rather than as charity.28

Once judged in need of aid, Revolutionary War veterans were bestowed a status as
deserving individuals. John Murray, for instance, was deemed “a man of credibility and worthy
of relief.” Edmond Darnel’s testimony underscored that Murray’s service and character raised
him to a special level “as to deserve relief.” Even though Jonathan Scott was “extremely poor,”
Samuel Moore, whose property was adjacent to the county almshouse, regarded the veteran as “a
very respectable man.” In a letter to support the veteran’s pension application, Moore
commented that Scott’s “behavior is very respectable,” and noted his “superiority to the other
paupers” in the almshouse. Andrew Bryson was “a man of truth and credit.” James Hogge was
thought “a man of great respectability.” John Murphy was someone of “integrity” with “good
credit, reputation, and veracity.” Even in death, these men were remembered as virtuous.
Francis Carberry’s obituary highlighted that he “has been a good and respectable neighbor.”
Noting that in his lifetime he was “a revolutionary pensioner,” Levi Starling was heralded as a
“worthy compatriot.” Respectable poor veterans had become exemplars of revolutionary
character. American republicanism was especially concerned with the moral integrity of the
people, its citizenry. Republican social theory recognized that men had a natural tendency toward
self-centeredness, moral turpitude, and avarice. At the core of republican theory, then, was
concern over the private integrity of the individual citizen: his honesty, frugality, self-control, and
moral self-responsibility.29
For thirty-five years, the government had resisted pensions for soldiers, fearing the formation of a lazy pensioner class. Revolutionary Americans perceived pension programs as "aristocratic and vice-ridden institutions that undermined civic virtue." Republican citizens feared that soldiers on the dole might create a class of pensioners who would endanger liberty and democracy. Benefits such as commutation of pay or pension might create a parasitic class of placemen perpetually supported at the public expense. Revolutionaries were disillusioned with the British system of secured offices and placemen, and they had been reluctant to establish a pension program for soldiers of the Revolutionary Army. Early American society was convinced pensions would only create a shiftless class of people supported by the taxpayers' hard labor. Dependence of any kind supposedly rendered one susceptible to all sorts of temptations and impositions. Despised by republican ideologues, dependent persons became objects of suspicion because they were seen as susceptible to corruption.  

Opponents to pension legislation feared that anything in the way of government-sponsored readjustment assistance would produce a lazy and privileged class of men, creating the type of social corruption which the revolutionary idealism of the "glorious cause" had sought to abolish. Historian Charles Royster discovered opposition to pensions as early as 1778, but by 1818 the old soldiers were advancing in years and dwindling in number. Concern for indigent and aged patriots who had sacrificed in the noble cause of liberty overtook fears of creating a group dependent on government, and new congressional action established pensions based on economic need. The 1818 act reversed the Founders' policy against service pensions and helped to remake America's memory of the Revolution by elevating the "once maligned" Continental Army to the status of the nation's benefactor. It apotheosized Continental troops as embodiments of the spirit of '76, so that by 1818 a new generation viewed the Continental Army as a republican institution, thereby transforming it into an exception to the Revolutionary generation's creed that all regular armies were corrupt and threats to liberty.  

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Traditional English poor relief, furthermore, held that since resources were limited, infirm elders had priority over the able-bodied poor. This set a precedent for exceptionalism, whereby elders were deemed worthy recipients of charity. Veterans’ status as elders was frequently noted and usually prefaced other designations; most were simply identified as an “old soldier.” William Rogers wrote on behalf of James Kirk, emphasizing how the “old veteran” was “advanced in years” and “very anxious for relief.” The veterans themselves acknowledged that they were simply not as fit and able-bodied, resilient and physically strong as they once were. While they were highlighting their destitution at the end of life to obtain pension funds, aging veterans exhibited a morbid acuteness of their own mortality. Beyond poverty, time was their enemy too. Thomas Doughty told the court, “as I was a stout man in ’76 you must know that the grave will soon be my lot.” James Kirk asked for “the small pittance” granted to “old soldiers for the few years and perhaps days” that he “may still survive.” Death certainly was an active presence in the lives of old and young early Americans. Veterans recognized that death may be around the corner and used that to full advantage and full dramatic effect when applying for a stipend.32

Distrust of the poor presupposed that only the indolence and dissipation of the poor could account for their misery. The poor appeared blameworthy for their own impoverishment, especially in America where, it was commonly asserted, the natural abundance of the land returned a comfortable sufficiency with little exertion. The deponents went out of their way to show clearly that they were not at fault for their misfortune. Little stigma was attached to poverty if it was generally due to circumstances beyond the individual’s control. James Kirk maintained that his poor financial condition resulted “from some unfortunate circumstances” whereby “he has lost his property.” The pensions fostered a dichotomy between the deserving poor of Continental troops and indigent non-veterans who were seen as personally responsible for their
status. With widespread public support, elderly revolutionary pensioners were not stigmatized or perceived as contested recipients of public largesse. 33

Profile of the Cohort in the Continental Army

During the entire course of the war, Bucks County, Pennsylvania (see Maps 1 and 2), with about four thousand adult males or seven percent of the state’s taxpayers, manned approximately three percent (5 of approximately 155) of the infantry companies of Continentals recruited in Pennsylvania. If Bucks had contributed its fair share to the Continental Army, it would have manned ten or eleven companies—more than a one hundred percent increase over its actual contribution. The difficulty of filling the ranks and meeting quotas meant that recruiting officers often targeted impoverished and young men as potential enlistees. 34

Military historians have questioned soldiers’ motivations for enlistment and the subsequent difficulty they faced trying to get the wages, bonuses, and benefits they had earned. The consensus has been that the overwhelming majority of the men who enlisted were poor, coming from what might be considered the lower and lower-middle sorts of early American society, and joined the Continental Army for hope of material gain. Beginning in 1776 the practice of offering monetary and land bounties became widespread in Revolutionary Pennsylvania. It was common practice among European eighteenth-century armies to offer modest material rewards in return for military service. When Pennsylvania did so in 1776, the state sought to bolster enrollment in the ranks by making the risks of war somewhat more attractive to poor citizens. Enlistees were also concerned with protecting their communities and loved ones, but the meager bounties helped substitute for wages needed among the laboring poor. The actions of a group of Bucks County volunteers provide an example of how vital the offering of bounties was in motivating some men. These new recruits for the Flying Camp raised in August 1776 simply “refused to march until they had received their bounties.” The promise of
economic reward for difficult military service remained a powerful inducement to enlist among poor men throughout the rest of the war.35

Works devoted to the social and economic make-up of the Continental establishment reveal a great deal about who fought in the war. Where enlistment records exist and soldiers listed their age and prewar occupations (the evidence is fragmentary), the data revealed that the majority of recruits were young, landless, and unskilled. These characteristics are borne out by the sample of Bucks County men who received pensions (see Table 1). The stated occupations of Bucks County veterans demonstrated they were overwhelmingly members of the lower orders—those who worked with their hands. Laborers, journeymen, servants, apprentices, and lesser craftsmen comprised the lowest social ranks who entered the army. These men owned little or no property. Small farmers, artisans, and minor shopkeepers were among the lower middling classes who served as soldiers. Although these men owned a bit more than some of their comrades, they were far from well-off. A man’s wealth, then, determined the likelihood of his serving as a Continental soldier.

An analysis of soldiers’ occupations drawn from the sample of pensioners who identified their vocations evokes an image of the sorts of individuals who served in the ranks. Jacob Lewis was a carpenter. James Hogge was a blacksmith. Dennis Cain and Henry Fratt were fence makers. James Kirk, Jeremiah Murray, and Benjamin Watson were farmers, which was a common enough pursuit in the predominantly rural county and state. Brothers George and Jonathan Scott both explained that they were “unable to work.” Andrew Stoope candidly stated that he had “no trade.” The sample was comprised of landless laborers, those who had managed to obtain a small property, day laborers and unskilled laborers, and artisans. Even within the ranks of artisans, though, a hierarchy existed. At the bottom were coopers, weavers, and shoemakers who possessed limited and easily learned skills and needed little capital. Among the pensioners from Bucks, nineteen percent were among this lower group of weavers, coopers, and
shoemakers. The clear plurality of the sample, twenty-four percent, reported to be laborers. Milling, plastering, blacksmithing, tanning, shingling, and carpentry each represented approximately three percent of the sample respectively. Farmers formed only eight percent of the sample population, reflecting that the bedrock of the sample was a large number of landless laborers. Eleven percent claimed they could not work or did not have an occupation. Clearly these men composed some of the lower ranks of early American society.  

Class, social status, and age played significant roles in determining who would serve in the Continental Army. Continental recruiting parties blandished disempowered elements of colonial society that their best employment opportunity lay in the army. The concern of the Bucks County volunteers reveals an important dimension of the soldier’s experience as a “waged military laborer.” The destitute enlistees temporarily traded their civil liberties and possibly their lives for more immediate wages, food, and clothing. Soldiers were entering into what was analogous to an indentureship, where recruits became a group of unfree labor. Landless and without property, poor recruits only owned their labor to bargain and sell, and enlisted for the pittance they received in pay or because they had no viable alternative.  

A disproportionate number of men from the lower ranks of society, then, took up arms and risked their lives in the Revolutionary cause. Historians of the Revolution agree that the vast preponderance of common soldiers were not only poor, but also young men ranging from their late teens to their mid-twenties. In a sample of Pennsylvania Continentals, John Trussell found that almost three-fourths were between eighteen and thirty-two years of age at the time of their service, and well over half were only in their twenties. The Bucks County cohort exhibited similar traits, with eighty-nine percent thirty-two years of age and below and over three quarters (seventy-six percent) between the age range of sixteen and thirty. In addition, sixty-five percent (nearly two-thirds) of the sample were in their twenties in 1776, with the greatest number of veterans falling within the twenty-one to twenty-five bracket (Figures 1 and 2). In 1776,
furthermore, more individuals were under twenty (nineteen percent) than were over thirty (sixteen percent). If the Bucks County sample is skewed toward the majority, it is less a problem than a boon. Aspects of poor people's lives related here were the experiences of the extremely poor and desperate young men who disproportionately constituted the ranks.\textsuperscript{38}

Sheer demand for manpower forced authorities to offer more monetary and land bounties. As predominantly rural residents, the members of the sample tended to be drawn to the inducement of land bounties. Of course, in a society in which independence began with ownership of land, men from all regions found the award of property attractive. Risking life and limb in war was a severe task that appeared worthwhile particularly to the propertyless in exchange for their own stake in land after the war. While the war was not fought by men interested solely in the individual material gain offered by military service, they often enlisted in an attempt to become independent farmers.

John Resch's recent study of veterans in Peterborough, New Hampshire, suggested that Continental Army soldiers in fact represented a cross section of that town's population. Resch was quick to fault historians such as Charles Neimeyer, whose study of the Continental Army's soldiery reached the conclusion that the popular notion of the war as fought by "well-to-do and yeoman farmers" was a national myth. Resch's argument is the exception within the literature, and suffered from numerous analytic problems, including merging Continental and militia troops. For the past thirty years, historians have been investigating the social origins of the men who served in the military during the formative years of the United States, and found that great numbers of Continentals were in desperate straits before the war. "A short time before the Revolutionary War," veteran David Kinsey "went to live at a public house." The dominant historical interpretation posits that the Continentals constituted the youngest, the poorest, and the most marginal members of early America's communities, including significant numbers of recent immigrants. The typical Continental soldier, then, was not the yeoman farmer of American myth.
In fact, the Continental Army of the Revolution drew its soldiers from the poorest third of society and contained disproportionate numbers of drifters, servants, British deserters, captured loyalists, convicts, and drafted substitutes.\(^{39}\)

**The Impact and Long-Term Costs of a Major Historical Event**

The American Revolution has traditionally been regarded as one of the least bloodstained wars that the country ever experienced (see Figure 3). Howard H. Peckham conservatively estimated that there were 25,324 military deaths during the War of Independence. Of the total death figure among Revolutionary soldiers and sailors, 7,174 died in battle, an estimated 10,000 succumbed to disease in camp, and approximately 8,500 prisoners died in British captivity. Another 8,241 were wounded in battle and survived, while 1,426 were missing in action. Such figures are dwarfed by the staggering 618,222 military deaths of the Civil War, and the 405,399 military deaths of the Second World War. Even the so-called forgotten Korean conflict generated over twice as many military deaths as the Revolutionary War.\(^{40}\)

These totals, however, need to be placed in the context of the contemporary populations. When assessing military casualties from this perspective (see Figure 4), the War of Independence is the second highest-ranked war in casualties behind only the Civil War, still the country’s bloodiest war. The Revolutionary War marked the second highest rate of fatalities relative to population of any American military struggle. It had been a long and costly war, resulting in approximately 25,000 American war-related deaths, which represented almost one percent of the entire population. Except for the Civil War, which killed nearly 1.6 percent of the population, no other United States war took such a frightful toll. If a basic estimate of 175,000 total participants is accurate, including regulars and militia actually in the field, approximately one out of every five revolutionary soldiers did not come away from the war unscathed. Since the bulk of the
fighting fell to the Continental rank and file, they suffered a casualty rate as high as thirty to forty percent, a dramatically larger proportion of participants killed compared to the thirteen percent loss figure among Union troops during the Civil War. Thus, the American Revolution was an ordeal with far greater human costs than commonly perceived.\textsuperscript{41}

Dislocations resulting from the Revolutionary War, furthermore, stretched long past the conclusion of hostilities, as many who survived were disabled during the war. In many pension applications veterans carefully described wounds, disease, injuries, and treatment. In addition to about 25,000 military deaths, another 8,241 soldiers and sailors were wounded in battles and survived. Survivors with service wounds reentered civilian life at a disadvantage, and their disabilities adversely affected their ability to work. Veteran James Starr, for instance, stated in 1820 that he was “still suffering with wounds received in the service.” He was “not one third of his time capable of pursuing his trade and at best not capable of doing half work” due to war injuries and other “pains.” Petitioning the state of Pennsylvania for a pension, David Edgar described “having received wounds in defense of the country.” In September 1776 John Murphy was “in the battle at Harlem where he was wounded by a musket ball in the leg.” Levi Starling reportedly “received two flesh wounds,” and was “severely wounded” while on Gen. Sullivan’s 1779 expedition to Tioga. Starling did not describe the nature and extent of his wounds in detail, but maintained that he was “not able to pursue” labor because of his service related wounds. On August 22, 1776, while setting fire to wheat stacks that had fallen into possession of the British, Isaac Lewis “was wounded...in an action on Long Island by a musket ball breaking his thigh.” It was with great difficulty that his comrades even rescued him. As a result of the wound inflicted “he has been a cripple ever since, entirely unable to walk but with a crutch.” Not all injuries were sustained from derring-do on the battlefield. David Alshouse was “disabled by a fall” in 1780 from a rampart at West Point, New York. He told the court that the injuries he sustained in the fall prevented him “in a great degree from getting a living by labor.” Among the debilitating
effects of war were persistent physical frailties that prevented many veterans from earning an income.\textsuperscript{42}

Beyond the enemy-inflicted wounds, the living and medical environment of military service could also be harmful to a soldier's well-being and recovery. Material complaints regarding the lack of supplies were salient throughout the war. Andrew Bryson "endured hunger, poverty, and want while in the service without a murmur.” Enlisted men endured tedious manual work and cramped living conditions that were supposedly appropriate for both their low military rank and social status. Common soldiers were all confronted with more dirt, disease, and the drudgeries of labor duty than their superiors. One of the hallmarks of army culture was the filth in which the men of the ranks lived. Flouting regulations regarding sanitation was a defiant way to resist the imposition of officers' social values upon them. It also reflected rank and file resistance to European regular army-style discipline. The enlisted soldiers' living conditions, furthermore, were a continuation of their civilian way of life. Poor men were not particularly clean at home and refused to change their habits in the army. Enlisted men believed that cleanliness was not the measure of the soldier, that cleaning was women's work. Poor sanitary conditions among troops, though, quickly led to outbreaks of disease. John Patton "was discharged on account of sickness.” In November 1776, John McKinney "was taken ill and sent to the hospital” during his service. He never specified an ailment, but it must have been debilitating because he "lay for some considerable time” and was "unable to do duty all winter.” To make matters worse, common soldiers received poor care. Doctors and hospitals merely exacerbated the problem of disease, and enlisted men received far worse care than did their superiors. Disease contracted in camp and the lack of adequate medical care, then, prolonged a person's inability to follow a daily routine.\textsuperscript{43}

Soldiers with severe injuries or illnesses were commonly sent home because hospitals lacked the facilities to care for them, and enlisted men were financially responsible for their own
medical care. During his second year in the service, David Kinsey was in a “bad state of health” and “went home sick.” Due to his “indisposition” the ailing Kinsey “was released from the service and permitted to return to his relations in Bucks County.” After receiving a wound in the thigh, Isaac Lewis “was in several hospitals...for many months,” until “some of his friends took him there from.” Later, one account records, he was “brought home by his parents.” Lewis’s case suggests he was rescued from an environment in which he was slowly recovering or possibly failing to recover. Both cases also reveal the importance of family for receiving injured returning veterans. Historian Keith Wilbur emphasized that the poor medical care, neglect, or even lack of treatment had a long-lasting effect on the soldiers’ post-war health. Gunshot wounds could result in blood poisoning or gangrene, which often required amputation or caused death. Bones that went unset led to disfigurement, or disability such as crippling or lameness. Poorly treated or untreated wounds often became infected and if chronic debilitated the entire body. The relatively primitive state of medical care meant that simple injuries—a broken leg, for example, or a laceration—could be permanently crippling.44

While deplorable conditions existed in camp and the hospitals of the tented field, British prisons were notoriously atrocious. Soldiers from Pennsylvania were recruited on a local level, and many of the veterans in the sample served in the Third and Fifth Pennsylvania Regiments. During the summer of 1776 these units almost single-handedly constructed Fort Washington on northern Manhattan Island. The men of the Third and Fifth Pennsylvania Regiments had performed virtually uninterrupted service at Mount Washington from the time they arrived at New York in June 1776. Like all the troops sent to New York in the spring of 1776, the Third and Fifth Pennsylvania had been hit hard by fever and sickness during the summer months. It was, in Alexander Graydon’s telling, a severe summer’s long labor that produced “real injury” and severely impaired “the health of the troops.” Sickness was the principal cause behind the declining number of fit men on the eve of battle. The British seized the fort in November 1776
capturing about 2,800 American officers and soldiers in a mass surrender. Continental soldier Lambert Dorland was among those taken prisoner at Fort Washington, and was held captive for over a year. Dorland recounted that throughout the winter he “was kept in close confinement” and “suffered extreme hardships with cold and hunger.” A. B. Boileau, an officer writing in support of Dorland’s application, recalled seeing Dorland “after his release from imprisonment,” remarking that “he was in a very weak and emaciated condition.” Henry Fratt was also taken prisoner at Fort Washington and held in captivity for three months. He “suffered” while held in British captivity and left his incarceration “in a very languishing condition.” The deponents suggested that they did not quickly recover from the deplorable conditions they were exposed to for such lengthy periods of time.45

Many of the hardships, illnesses, and injuries that the Continental soldiers experienced during the Revolutionary War affected them physically and financially for the remainder of their lives. Soldiers’ service experiences were such a defining moment in their lives that they relived them through stories passed on to family members. A father’s war stories could center on his suffering as an enlisted man. Andrew Bryson’s daughter, Mary, testified in 1851 that she had “often heard” her father “speak of... the exposure, the privations, and the hardships he had endured” up until the war’s end. Applying for a widow’s pension in 1848, Sarah Stoop was able to recall her husband’s military unit and recount his arduous service, “as he often declared in his lifetime.” Scholar Alan Bowman considered numerous conditions that marked the soldier’s life during the War of Independence such as sickness, the trauma of combat, battle injury, starvation, impoverishment, discipline, and imprisonment. His research, though, only focused on the war and does not move beyond the conflict into the new republic. Further attempts are needed to fill the lacunae in our understanding of the Revolutionary War’s long-term effects.46

The Revolutionary War exacted an extraordinarily heavy human toll, and a reconsideration of the cost in human lives and disabilities conveys some human dimensions of the
war. For those suffering from war injuries, certainly the long-term impact of the conflict would be profound. The difficulty of continuing a civilian occupation in the postwar world was a lasting legacy of the Revolution. The impairing legacy of combat can still be observed in the later lives of these men. Truly, some men were physically ruined by the war and others bore scars that never disappeared. In these cases, the Revolutionary War exacted a heavy price and adversely affected veterans’ economic viability as they grew older. The toll in human life, limb, and physical suffering continued to weigh heavily upon ex-soldiers’ years after the war ended.47

Standard of Living

Old veterans and their families demonstrated extreme material poverty, a sign of the sample’s overall deteriorating economic circumstances. The Revolutionary War left some veterans physically less able to pursue a living while other aging veterans in the sample cited a waning capacity to work, stretching their limited financial resources. The property schedules included in the 1820 depositions list the precise value of household items, forming a potential source for historians interested in how much and what kinds of household property the poorer members of society owned. Reviewing the contents of the veterans’ inventories shows clearly that these were indeed deprived households with few holdings. Indeed, the property lists of veterans were usually quite short and indicated that a substantial majority of these veterans had little property.

Most veterans from the sample lived in spartan material conditions, sometimes almost completely deficient of material possessions. Impoverished veteran Jonathan Scott’s walking staff was “the only article which I can call my own.” His brother George declared, “I have no property.” Others were also in the same dire straits. Both David Edgar and Andrew Stoope reported, “I have no goods except my clothing.” David Alshouse told the court, “I have no property of any kind.” Jacob Lewis and Jeremiah Murray both admitted, “I have no property
except my clothing.” There were some veterans who had only a bare minimum of possessions. Stephen Ballard explained, “I have besides necessary clothing and bedding one chest.” Similarly, David Kinsey stated, “The only article of property I possess...is one old chest.” The property lists of other veterans were quite short. James Hogge owned two axes, one flail, and a spade. Most maintained a rudimentary existence, owning a few household items. Houses were plainly furnished with one table, several chairs, a chest, and a few kitchen utensils. Very occasionally a veteran possessed spinning wheels or a looking glass. The households were clearly without adornment or ornamentation, but simple and quite bare. The additional mention of a musket suggests their soldiering past. For instance, Andrew Stoll possessed an “old musket,” and James Kirk held on to “one musket which I was permitted to bring home with when discharged from the Revolutionary War.” Many of these elderly lived in deteriorating housing units of substandard condition.48

The inventories make clear that the veterans and their families did not enjoy material success. For some veterans the only possessions they owned were the tools of their trade. Andrew Cramer’s sparse list of possessions included only a cooper’s adze (an axlike tool used for dressing wood), one punch (a tool for circular piercing and forcing a bolt or rivet in a hole), one round shave, a drawing knife, one chisel, one file, and a small saw. Levi Starling claimed to have merely a scythe and tackling. Lambert Dorland stated that he did not have “any personal property except my clothes, a chest, and a few shoemaker’s tools.” Among the meager items owned by James Starr were “a few plasterer’s tools.”49

Many of the aging veterans lived in penury, leading some to rely on public assistance. Most often, persons in need remained in their homes or in the homes of others and were given out-relief—clothes, firewood, bread, and often small weekly cash payments. Twenty-two percent of the sample received aid from the almshouse in the postwar period. Six veterans and their families, representing sixteen percent of the sample, were seeking relief from the almshouse in
1817, only a year before the first federal pension legislation. David Alshouse indicated spending "some time in the almshouse." In his deposition, Jonathan Scott described himself as a "pauper." In March 1810, Scott arrived at the county almshouse with only "an old suit of clothes," an overseer noted, and spent "several years" there because he "could not do any kind of work." After 1810, his name began reappearing consistently on the poor house register, and he sought relief as late as November 1817. Other veterans of the cohort relied upon the assistance of the almshouse prior to receiving pensions. George Scott was on the register as early as 1812 and his name frequently recurred on the rolls. John Murray looked toward public aid in April 1815. A number of the veterans sought local relief around the same time. Andrew Stooke "and his three sons" appear on the relief rolls for Spring 1817. In August 1817, David Alshouse and Claudius Martin received payment from the poor house, and one month later in September 1817 David Edgar needed public relief. "Jacob Lewis and wife" turned to the almshouse for assistance in early December 1817. That these aging men and their families appeared on poor house register only about a year before federal pension legislation suggests that their health was already failing and their economic situation was worsening. Henry Fratt received public aid of another sort, detailing, "I have for several years [been] allowed to live in a tenement belonging to the public almshouse of the county." Truly, the quality of life for these older adults was deteriorating and many were reduced to a terrible financial condition late in life. This destitute group of people found it increasingly difficult to meet basic individual and family needs without resorting to charity.50

The incidence of poverty was especially pronounced among solitary and disabled veterans. Half of those seeking support from the poor house had no family, indicating that the family was an important support structure. The traditional social system was fundamentally based on family and kin, where remedies for dealing with the community’s unfortunate were familial in form. These men had no family to turn to and ended up looking for help from the county poor.
house. A quarter of the veterans appearing on poor house registers only had a wife, while the remaining quarter could not earn a sufficient income to maintain their nuclear households. At the time of their reliance on the poor house, the men were an average sixty-seven years of age, with most above the age of sixty-six. Those of the cohort turning toward the public relief were comprised of the upper age ranges, including seventy-nine year old Claudius Martin who sought assistance in 1817.

Many of the Bucks County sample were “in bad debts.” Court assessed wealth is misleading because totals are only for property and did not calculate debts into the official final valuation. A more accurate sense of economic standing would add the total value of money and other assets, minus outstanding debts. Some veterans were indebted for larger sums than their possessions were worth. The property of Levi Starling was appraised at one dollar, and he testified that he was indebted $64.50. Henry Fratt owed $67.50 in debts. His property, however, was assessed at $40.00. James Hogge was indebted $25.00, but his property was worth only $10.00. Adam Swager’s property was valued at $12.00, but he had borrowed $18.00 to pay his rent. William Kernachan was $415.62 in arrears, which was almost double the value of his property.51

Others had more complicated situations. The property of James Kirk was assessed at an extraordinary $2,827.57, and was initially “rejected on account of his holding too much property.” Kirk maintained that he was “entirely destitute of property except the trifles,” because he had to “sell all the goods” with the sheriff auctioning “him out of his land and chattels.” By 1823 he only had a stove and one saddle and bridle, with “the rest having all been sold by the Sheriff for bona fide debts.” Sheriff Stephen Brock wrote to corroborate the veteran’s story, explaining “I sold...a plantation or tract of land of about 120 acres the property of James Kirk...for the sum of $1,513.37.” The money from the sales went to creditors, and Kirk was left with his remaining debts, which amounted to a striking $2,358.00. Benjamin Watson’s property
was assessed at $620.00, but he had $240.00 in outstanding debts. Thomas Corbitt was unable to pay off his debts of $336.22. Much of his property was subsequently sold under sheriff’s sale in execution of debts and delivered in payment to creditors. Not all veterans owed more than they were worth, but all were debt-burdened to some degree. George Crow’s property schedule was valued at $127.18. Yet his outstanding debts amounted to $35.00, and there was little prospect he would pay them off while he was unable “to perform a days work.” Since these men were too physically infirm to follow their trades and had no income it was impossible to escape from beneath the strain of debt.52

Court-assessed wealth, furthermore, only assigned an absolute value and did not take into account other variables. Land holding veterans repeatedly emphasized that their land was not valuable. Andrew Stoll, for instance, claimed to own twenty-four acres of “very poorly improved” and swampy pasture. Thomas Corbitt maintained that he was “unable to sell” or “raise his bread” on his “barren” land. Nor did court appraisals weigh infirmities, weaknesses, and other age-related frailties, which rendered tools and land unproductive. John Weasey was a weaver by trade, but because the work “injures my health,” he explained, “I am obliged to desist” from the craft. Thus, these veterans lived under financially straitened conditions, and their fallow land or idle tools were not generating income.53

Age Changes in Physical Health

Physical changes associated with the aging process are complex, multifaceted, and multidirectional. Between age forty and seventy, there is a loss of muscle strength, amounting to approximately ten to twenty percent with more severe loss of thirty to forty percent after age seventy. Similarly, the overall course of bone development in adulthood is toward loss of bone strength, resulting in diminished ability of the bones to withstand mechanical pressure, with greater vulnerability to fracture. The decrease in various measures of bone strength ranges from
five to twelve percent per decade from the twenties through the nineties. The period of maximum bone loss associated with aging is between the fifties and the seventies. In addition, age changes in respiration can lead to the unpleasant feelings of dyspnea and fatigue, which in turn may lead the individual to avoid strenuous activities. Also, a number of age-related changes occur throughout the body's organ systems and sensory processes. Mobility changes in important ways over the course of the adult years such that movement becomes more difficult, more painful, and less effective. Outcomes of reduced muscle strength, bone strength, and joint mobility created a heightened susceptibility of these older individuals to reduce their general level of activity in which they had typically engaged.54

Illness and poverty formed a vicious cycle, where abject poverty bred disease, which, in turn, undermined poor people's ability to earn a sufficient income. Debilitating physical conditions were not merely the result of aging. Heredity was obviously a contributing factor in disease and longevity, but environmental conditions were also important. The physical aging process occurs against a backdrop of a lifetime of accumulated experiences. Patterns of well being could vary greatly within the elderly population too. Poor people, for instance, historically lived and worked in less sanitary environments, usually ate less nutritious foods, and had less adequate medical care than their more affluent contemporaries. Well-to-do people, on the other hand, were likely to live and work in a more healthful and safer environment, which paid benefits well into old age. Income disparity, then, was a factor when these less skilled veterans grew old. How long and how well people lived was closely linked to their overall standard of living. Physical and financial hardships were only some of the more pronounced consequences of illness during old age.

The pension applications revealed health problems among these indigent elderly veterans, which seriously hampered their ability to work. Veterans reported one or more chronic conditions and many cited suffering from multiple physical disorders that restricted their activities. It is true
that older people are more susceptible to chronic disorders, and indeed, both the number and severity of chronic and acute illnesses increase with age. The incidence of these chronic disorders, and the likelihood of becoming disabled by them, rise progressively with age during older adulthood. In their depositions, the veterans invariably complained of their inability to work “by reason of old age and infirmities.” A “very infirm” seventy-two year old Jonathan Scott claimed to be “unable to follow any business.” Persistent health problems explained why James Hogge, one of the older veterans at seventy-nine, “was no longer able to follow” blacksmithing. George Scott was “wholly unable to follow any occupation” on account of age-related limitations in physical functioning. Andrew Cramer, a seventy-three year old cooper, claimed that “through age and infirmity [I] am unable to follow my business.” George Crow’s occupation was making oak shingles, but “old and infirm” at the age of sixty-six, he admitted, “I am not able to perform a days work at that or any other manual labor.” For Lambert Dorland, age-related impairments left him “unable to earn my living” at the age of sixty-six. “Bodily infirmity” left sixty-seven year old Jacob Doughty “unable to get a living without assistance.”

Many of the veterans described physical weakening as adversely affecting their work productivity. “On account of my infirmities and weakness,” sixty-year-old Thomas Doughty explained, “I am incapable and have not capacity sufficient” to work. He dramatically portrayed his desperate situation by further complaining, “I have suffered much with lameness which doctors cannot help me.” William Kernachan, age seventy, stated that “for the last five years [I] have been unable to follow” weaving “by reason of age and weakness.” His physical impairments, then, began interfering with his capacity for work around sixty-five. Jeremiah Murray identified his business as farming, which the seventy-year-old admitted, “I am not able to follow on account of lameness and other infirmities.” Many of the negative consequences of a long life stemmed from the increasing likelihood that older family members developed and
suffered from chronic and disabling health conditions. Many of these chronic health conditions ultimately reduced the functional independence of older parents.56

Rheumatism among aging veterans was a frequent complaint, impairing their ability to function. “Constant rheumatism” prevented Stephen Ballard from following his occupation as a laborer. James Starr was sixty-two and remarked that he was “greatly afflicted with rheumatic pains.” Sixty-seven-year old Thomas Corbitt was “unable to pursue” milling “in consequence of rheumatic complaints and general disability.” By 1824, furthermore, Corbitt’s state of health was worsening, “afflicted with a pulmonary complaint and unable to labor.” Truly, these older individuals were at heightened risk of developing chronic health problems, such as arthritis.57

Beyond physical weakness and pathological conditions of the muscles, joints, and bones, another recurrent health problem was poor vision. Impoverished veterans often complained of a reduction in visual acuity accompanying the aging process. Among other physical problems that included “some symptoms of the dropsy,” the ailing sixty-year-old Thomas Doughty remarked, “I am afflicted with the gravel” (a condition marked by having minimal vision). “Being afflicted severely with the gravel and otherwise infirm,” sixty-eight year old Henry Fratt said, “I am often unable to labor.” Seventy-one-year old carpenter Jacob Lewis described how by 1820 “a failure of my eye-sight has rendered it difficult to pursue that business.” Due to “indistinctness of vision” sixty-six-year old John Patton ceased laboring as a tailor. Visual problems had many effects on everyday life and practical implications, including increased dependence on others and interference with the ability to complete tasks of living. Given the centrality of vision to many activities, changes with age in visual functions can have profoundly limiting effects.58

Deponents also provided a glimpse into the health status of family members, in particular, their wives. Married veterans such as George Crow and Dennis Cain frequently described their wives as “very infirm like myself,” although the nature and degree of infirmity varied. Despite his own age-related incapacities, Francis Carberry emphasized that his sixty-two-
year old wife Sarah was “still more infirm than myself.” Grace Hawkenberry was fifty-eight and “lame with an ulcer on her leg.” James Starr’s “very sickly wife” was “continually under the attendance of a physician” for an unspecified ailment. At fifty-two, Sarah Corbitt was “very much afflicted with the rheumatism and out of health generally.” She was also reportedly “lame in her arms,” because she “has one of her wrists broken.” The cost for medical attention could cut into a deponent’s personal estate. While trying to reduce the valuation of his property schedule, Thomas explained that in order to pay for his wife’s care he sold one of their cows for sixteen dollars “to pay for a doctor’s bill.” Jacob Doughty’s sixty-three-year old wife, Laetitia, was “in a dropsical state and unable to work.” Sixty-seven-year old Hannah Watson was “very infirm and has for many years been a cripple.” Catherine Scott’s husband, George, characterized her as “very feeble” at age sixty. John Weasey’s relatively young forty-three year old wife was said to be “in weak health.” Also noted at times were the condition of younger household members. Thomas Corbitt indicated that “my children” were “all in good health.” Jacob Doughty’s twelve-year-old grandson, Benjamin Hampton, was “cripple in one foot.”

Elderly veterans showed changes in physical ability and decrements in bodily functions associated with the wear and tear of aging. “If! was young and active,” David Alshouse told the court in 1820, making baskets could earn him a living. At the age of sixty-two, though, he continued, “I could not now make a living [because] I am infirm and in a great measure helpless.” Jonathan Scott was “too feeble for any active employment.” He had once “lived by land labor until he failed in his strength.” Francis Carbury frankly explained, “infirmities have rendered me unable to perform much laborious work.” He also sheds light on the challenges these men faced in obtaining work. Restricted to seeking less intensive manual labor, he complained that even “such light service as I am able and willing to perform is difficult to procure.” John Murray was a tailor by trade and tried to “follow that business when I can get it out,” but disclosed that as of
May 1820 “I have not earned three dollars for five months.” Grappling with poor physical health often forced veterans to discontinue or limit their work and exacerbated financial problems.60

The veterans displayed an inverted occupational mobility; many were descending down the ladder and failing even to maintain their trade skills. Plagued by diminished strength, aging veterans expressed their need to seek less skilled and less physically taxing work. Fifty-six-year old John Weasey detailed, “I am by trade a weaver, but it injures my health and I am obliged to desist from it.” No longer capable of doing this work, he stated, “I follow common labor when I can obtain it.” Jacob Lewis abstained from carpentry, explaining, “I have now no dependence but common labor.” With a comparatively more skilled trade than most of the sample, James Hogge declared in his deposition that “I am no longer able to follow” blacksmithing, and forced to “depend solely for my support on occasional employment at common labor.” John Blumdin told the court that the only way he could support his children was “by his daily labor.” In 1812 Blumdin was a landless resident of Middletown Township and assessed an occupational tax as a sawyer, but by the 1820s his pension application and tax returns list him as a laborer. No longer working at their trades, these veterans struggled to get by and scrapped together any means to support themselves and their families. It also indicates that common labor was all the more pronounced among the occupational breakdown of the sample. Even though these aging men may have been skilled in a trade, they were not necessarily engaged in that occupation by the time of their depositions in 1818 and 1820.61

A common cause of increased poverty, then, was becoming too ill or disabled to work. The later years for these veterans were a time of progressive, chronic loss in physiological functioning. Indeed, there were a wide variety of chronic health conditions, and older veterans and their wives experienced several of these conditions concurrently. High incidences of chronic health conditions translated into functional limitations and threats to capacity for independent living. Perhaps Thomas Corbitt best represents this predicament; he had “become entirely unable
to follow my occupation or do any other work." Indeed, the rate of decline in functioning was noticeably quickening. Associated with increased illness and disability is the fact that, as shown in Table 2, poverty increased with age. Larger proportions of people in the seventy-five-and-over group were poorer than those who were between sixty-five and seventy-five, with no veterans of the seventy-five and up group above the $51 range. Clearly, such factors as age and health experience in later life affected economic vitality deleteriously.62

Economic Health

One of the single most important indicators of a person’s economic status was his or her income-earning capacity. In the life cycle of a person, income tended to increase fairly steadily from young adulthood to middle adulthood and then to decrease rather sharply in older adulthood. Moreover, with their earning power curbed it was very difficult for these destitute veterans to escape from underneath poverty. The veterans displayed a general decline in income during older adulthood, and functional limitations left little opportunity to resume working or otherwise increase one’s income.

Available tax assessment lists confirm that these aging veterans and their families were in poor economic health. Only fragmentary tax information was found on the veterans for the year 1820, specifically twelve certain tax returns (representing only about thirty-two percent of the sample). Where tax records were available for 1820, there was a great disparity between the figures for veterans and the samples of nonpensioners (see Tables 3 and 4). The cohort of veterans were assessed an average tax of $.24, whereas the Hilltown Township sample averaged $5.49 and the Falls Township averaged $7.19. The valuation of taxable assets was equally telling, with veterans appraised an average amount of $139. The sample of Hilltown Township, however, averaged $3524 and the Falls Township sample averaged $4214. The figures indicate that the cohort accumulated only meager taxable assets.63
As historian Billy G. Smith noted, one of the problems with plumbing tax lists for statistical data is that many marginal men were excused or missed by tax assessors because of their poverty or geographic mobility. These veterans may have been relieved of taxes and removed from the rolls because of poverty, which helps account for their marked absence from such records. They were nonratables—persons with insufficient means to pay even the smallest tax. Assessors taxed according to an ascribed value of their occupations, an early income tax based on the estimated earnings and worth of a taxpayer’s job, as well as the worth of their taxable goods—items of real property, such as horses, cows, slaves, and real estate. Tax data, then, are biased toward wealthier and stable occupational groups since tax assessors excused a large number of people who could not afford to pay taxes, while they frequently missed others who were among the mobile poor.64

Nevertheless, tax assessments provide a fuller view of veterans’ financial condition than relying solely on the pension material. Propertyless taxpayers accounted for the bulk of the sample and were composed almost exclusively of men who owned no taxable assets and were assessed the minimum rate on their incomes. A few were taxpayers of minimum property, consisting primarily of men who, in the judgment of assessors, fared slightly better than those at the lowest tax rate. Some veterans were levied modest occupational valuations (and therefore earning a slightly higher income), even though most of them were without taxable assets, owning a few small items—a very inexpensive dwelling place, a tiny piece of land, or a cow. None of the veterans from the sample included individuals with considerable earnings or who possessed more substantial belongings—a slave or some parcel of land yielding rent. None of these veterans ranked among the top percentile of taxpayers.

During the colonial period the poor had been legally defined as persons who were not rated for town or provincial taxes. The majority of the cohort fit such a definition of poverty. Veterans from the sample appeared on local tax rolls very infrequently, if at all, and it was not
uncommon for a veteran to turn up one year only to disappear and never reemerge on the tax lists. David Edgar, for instance, was a propertyless taxpayer who could be located on Bristol Township’s rolls only once in 1813 and paid the least possible tax for his occupational assessment. He was evidently reckoned too poor to pay and not retained on the tax lists. The veterans’ absence is not surprising since these were aging men who had accumulated only meager taxable assets or in some instances were wholly without any assets; they were not working enough to be assessed a high occupational tax.65

The majority of the veterans located on tax lists were in the lowest assessment category. Where it was possible to trace veterans across several years, they did not improve their position from one tax list to the next. In 1779, while a resident in Trenton Township, Hunterdon County, New Jersey, Dennis Cain possessed only a few items that were taxed. He was taxed on one horse, one horned cattle, and as a householder. By 1800 he had crossed the Delaware River, settling in Falls Township, Bucks County. In that year, Cain was assessed a minimal ten cents, possessing only one cow. In Morrisville Borough, Bucks County in 1812, he had acquired a tiny “lot of land,” about an eighth of an acre with no horses or cattle by this point, and assessed a tax of nineteen cents. Cain vanished from the tax records in 1818 when his name appears scratched off the roll for that year.66

Occupational evaluations accounted for most of the veterans’ total tax assessments. Upper Makefield Township resident Francis Carberry was a landless and propertyless taxpayer in 1812. With no taxable property, he was assessed a tax of twenty-two cents for his paltry earnings potential. The year 1815 was a particularly bad year to Carberry, whose occupational assessment dropped so low that he was only charged an eight cents tax. By 1821, a couple of years after initial pension benefits, his tax rate rose to where he was assessed a thirty-six cents tax. Just four short years later in 1825, though, the supposed potential of his job had slipped once again, to where he was assigned an eleven cents tax. As Carberry’s example highlights, tracing veterans
retained on the tax rolls reveals they were assessed on a modest scale because their earning power was very weak. Lacking taxable property, furthermore, assessment on occupations often accounted for the veterans’ total tax assessments. With their assessments fluctuating over the years but consistently hovering in the lowest bracket, aging veterans did not significantly improve their position from one tax list to the next. Those who were poor tended to remain at the lower end if the economic spectrum in older adulthood, and poverty in these older adults was very likely to be a long-term prospect. That the wealth of these workers usually did not increase as they grew older further reveals their limited opportunities.67

A general downward trend is discernable as conditions were getting worse for this small, infirm, insolvent group of veterans. The lack of economic autonomy forced aging veterans to rely upon their families, especially children when wives were equally frail or absent altogether. The larger question that takes center stage, then, is how poverty affected family structure and the nature of parent-adult child relationships. By 1820, when the revolutionary generation had given way to a new set of leaders, the country had almost ten million inhabitants. Between 1700 and 1800 the population increased almost twenty times. Truly, the revolutionaries lived the twilight of their lives during one of the world’s first great population explosions. Moreover, there was a considerable contrast between the aging revolutionary generation and the generation of the new republic. The average American was only sixteen in 1830, while the veterans were by that time well into their seventies and eighties. The aging and sometimes wholly incapacitated Continental veteran population contrasts sharply with a youthful and energetic nation. Looking at the aged in such a youthful setting permits an exploration of intergenerational relations among family members in an era of extraordinary larger demographic developments. Demographic patterns, after all, were both shaped by and in turn influenced families.

The crux of their problem was often their inability to work due to sickness, injury, or extreme old age, which drained a family’s resources. These veterans had relatively shortened
working lives at maximum efficiency, in an age when physical prowess mattered. When the impairments resulting from age-related illness prevented older adults from continuing independent functioning, some turned to family for help. The next section examines the ways in which a parent's poverty and chronic illness or disabling health condition affected the patterns of support provided by their adult children and consider larger implications for family constellations and relationships.

The Family Lives of Old Veterans

Census schedules, like other public records, provided fragmentary data on the veterans. Only fourteen veterans, or thirty-eight percent of the sample, could be identified in the 1820 census. For veterans living in New Jersey there was no data because the federal census records are not extant for that state between the years 1790 and 1820. Where the information was recoverable, the difference in overall household size was noticeable. Compared to the sample of male heads of household over forty-five years of age, the veterans had substantially smaller household sizes. The sample of veterans averaged 4.3 persons in a household, whereas Hilltown Township households averaged 7.2 and Falls averaged 6.6. As opposed to the sample of veterans, the Hilltown sample had 2.9 more persons per house while the Falls sample averaged 2.3 more persons per household (see Table 5). Historical research has dispelled the myths about the existence of an ideal three-generational family in the American past, according to which the elderly coresided with their adult children and were supported by the younger generations after they reached dependent old age. In reality, in the American colonies coresidence of three generations in the same household was not the modal familial arrangement. Early American households were nuclear in structure, and research suggests that, in areas of the West, the nuclear family and simple households predominated. The older generation resided in separate households from those of their married adult children. The pension records reveal that impoverished and
elderly veterans lived in a variety of household formations, ranging from nuclear families to a son coresiding with both parents. Although veterans' household composition varied considerably, a striking forty-two percent of veterans lived alone (see Tables 6 and 7). Half of the cohort either lived in nuclear or conjugal structures, but several resided with only a daughter or son. Family structure, though, is not merely a categorization and is more than a set of statistics; it is a set of relationships.68

The burden of poverty fell especially hard upon these aging survivors of the Revolutionary War. Elderly veterans were at a heightened susceptibility to poverty because no financial support was forthcoming from government or private employers. Many of these veterans were dependent because they were unable to carry out for themselves the activities necessary to maintain a basic standard of everyday living. Disabilities incurred during the war and physiological age changes rendered members of the cohort physically unable to work, magnifying their plight, and poverty tended to increase dependency. The elderly veterans were simply unable to earn an income due to physical infirmities accompanying old age. Residential patterns (see Tables 6 and 7) and family size, then, did matter because a larger family meant that aging veterans had more people to rely on for help. The link between solitary households and poverty indicates that poverty was especially pronounced when no family members were present.

An examination of older men's relationships with their children and grandchildren is long overdue for the early American period. Much of the research conducted on parenthood has concentrated on mothers' relationships with their children and on women's involvement in family care giving. Not much information exists about elderly men in early America, as research in family studies and gender studies have not systematically studied older men. Few researchers, furthermore, have explicitly considered fatherhood in later adulthood or even made extensive contrasts between men's and women's relations with dependent and adult children.69

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At times it seemed children could be the burden for their elderly veteran-fathers. Seventy-two-year-old John Blumdin reported “having thirteen children living, four of whom are under ten years of age and has no means of supporting them.” John Weasey, age fifty-six, had four children all under the age of ten, and “none of them [were] able to maintain themselves” because they were still young. Henry Fratt, age seventy, stated that his twenty-year-old son Henry and twenty-one-year-old daughter Margaret were “both able to maintain themselves,” implying the children were no longer a burden for the father. Often heads of nuclear families, which comprised a quarter of the sample (see Table 6), remarked that children were too young to perform any kind of labor. For the twenty-five percent of sample households with dependent children (see Table 7), young dependents were a drain on family resources if they could not contribute to the family’s maintenance.

Households were in flux, changing in their composition over time, a pattern that was evident in the peripatetic ways of some children. James Starr’s two oldest daughters, for instance, would “hire out and make out to clothe themselves” when they could “get employment.” When they became “sick or [were] out of employ they returned home and live[d] on” their father. This particular household regularly expanded and contracted, and reveals that parenthood was not segregated to certain periods in the life course. Parenthood—a major early American adult role—generally was a lifelong career and stretched over an entire lifetime without a necessarily permanent empty nest. It also suggests that leaving home, a phenomenon typically associated with the commencement of adulthood today, did not have such significance in the preindustrial period. Nevertheless, some veterans experienced the dissolution of the nuclear family unit. “I had two children” Thomas Doughty explained, but “both married and left me.” Francis Carberry reported, “I have two daughters aged thirty and twenty-four years who have for some years past been out on service on their own account.” During his application for a pension, Andrew Stoll informed the court that his two oldest children were “about leaving me or will soon leave us to do
for themselves." The family, therefore, was dynamic, with marked changes across people’s lives. When adult children moved out they reduced the amount of potential support within the house and contributed to social isolation.71

If old parents became dependent because of illness or poverty, they were supported by their children or other kin or were placed by the town authorities in the households of neighbors or even nonrelatives. They were placed in institutions only as a last resort. Older and disabled persons were primarily the responsibility of their families, and one family member—the primary caregiver—often assumed the responsibility for the care of impaired older adults. An established hierarchy determined who would become a primary caregiver to older family members. Spouses and children were the main caregivers for aging adults. The responsibility for care typically fell first to the spouse of the impaired older adult. When a spouse was unavailable or unable to assume the role of primary caregiver, adult children were turned to next.72

It is important to remember that family structure changed several times over the life cycle of its members. A notable extension of the household occurred in the later years of life, when elderly parents and the widowed were unable to maintain themselves in separate residences. In such cases of joint living under a single roof, old parents had an adult child live with them or they moved into a child’s household. To continue living separately in their own households, parents arranged that at least one adult child remain at home. Both historical and contemporary studies of support for older people have identified adult children, most commonly daughters, as the main caregivers, where spouses were not available. The main responsibility of day-to-day involvement with caregiving, particularly for frail, elderly parents, fell upon their offspring. Regardless of how many children a couple had, one child usually emerged in the role of caregiver. Most commonly, the parent keeper was the child who continued to reside with a parent after the other siblings had left home. Even when both parents were alive, the youngest daughter was expected
to remain at home and postpone or give up marriage in order to ensure support for the parents in their old age.  

The time in which young adult children moved out could be delayed, for indebtedness and ill-health tied some children more closely to their parents’ household. Young adult children sometimes stayed at home longer to provide care for aging parents. Benjamin Watson, age sixty-two, claimed that declining health had diminished his capacity to support his family, and claimed he was $220.00 in debt. Nor could his sixty-seven-year old wife contribute much because she was reportedly disabled. As a result, Watson’s two daughters, in their twenties, continued “living at home.” The veteran explained that his daughters were “able to maintain themselves out at work.” “Necessity,” however, compelled the parents “to keep them with us to assist in our support.” Sixty-four-year old Andrew Bryson was in a similar predicament, indebted and “not able to pursue an occupation” with only his twenty-year-old daughter living with him. Bryson explained to the court that his daughter “could maintain herself but for the necessity of taking care of me.” Age, infirmities, and indebtedness reinforced cultural norms that prescribed that young adult children, especially females, remain at home to support their parents and assume caretaking responsibilities.  

Among the cohort, there was only one case of an adult son assuming parent-care responsibilities. Why were fewer adult sons active support providers to their ill or dependent parents, and what were the consequences of providing such support for that son who did assume an active role in parent care? George Scott, age seventy, and his “feeble” sixty-year-old-wife, Catherine, for instance, were “wholly unable to follow any occupation,” forcing them to move in with their son. The parents, though, were a financial burden on the son’s household, as he was not “in a situation to afford the expense of maintaining” his parents. Family caregiving severely stretched the family resources of this child. To “aid in supporting” his parents, the son “received
a small allowance" from the county almshouse. Thus, aging and disabled veterans could be a burden on their children's finances and movement out of the house. 75

When older men needed help or did not have a spouse available, they often turned to adult children for assistance. From the sample one can make the observation that more daughters than sons were involved in parent-care; two daughters cared for infirm parents while one dutiful son helped his aging parents. Historically, it was women who maintained the lifelong role of kin keepers and were cast in the parent keeper's role. The traditional assumption held that women should shoulder the majority of family caregiving responsibilities. Wives and daughters primarily were perceived naturally to assume the central role of helping incapacitated relatives in their old age. In George Scott's case, his wife Catherine was also incapacitated and the census for 1800 shows that the couple only had one male child between the ages of ten and sixteen. At times, old veterans kept their young adult daughters home, but in this instance the elderly parents moved into the house of a married son only because there was no younger daughter available. 76

There was some indication of a gender differential in the involvement of sons and daughters in parent care, although the sample data exhibited both sexes providing help for their incapacitated mothers and fathers. Yet while there are simply not enough sample data to assert sweeping conclusions about daughters and sons unequally sharing involvement in parent care, it is clearer that one child usually assumed primary responsibility for the impaired parent(s).

Broadening the scope of this study will provide more data on parent-care activities and experiences, perhaps revealing different patterns other than primary caregivers, and would allow for a more comprehensive view of intergenerational relations in later-life families.

As people age, they commonly experience social isolation brought on by physical disability and the death of friends or spouse. The final and surely the most difficult transition in married life accompanied the death of a spouse. The bereavement and loneliness accompanying the death of a spouse show through the depositions. John McKinney, aged seventy-one, stated
that his "wife has long since been dead." The passing of a spouse could be such a traumatic event for some older men that they distinctly recalled the circumstances and chain of events leading to a wife's death. Before passing away, Thomas Doughty's wife "was taken with a complaint and lay on a bed of affliction for thirteen months." Among the most persistent themes was the sense of loneliness and isolation that some of these men faced as they aged. For older poor people, families provided the primary source of social support. Beyond isolation, solitariness had implications for living standards, economic security, and care. Poverty was greater among the forty-two percent of elderly veterans living alone (see Table 8). Approximately eighty-six percent of veterans living alone possessed less than $50 worth of property. Moreover, forty-three percent of veterans in solitary households had no valued property at all, whereas none of the veterans living in conjugal and nuclear households fell within the zero wealth bracket. Indeed, married older households demonstrated higher wealth levels than solitary households, and those who lived alone existed at a poverty level. Living arrangements, then, contributed to the risk of poverty for aging veterans because living alone increased the chances one would face poverty in old age.77

Family size, therefore, held long-term implications, significantly determining how much assistance aging veterans would receive. Smaller households, for instance, produced fewer siblings to share in parent care. Some of the veterans living in solitary living arrangements, furthermore, were widowers with adult children, but when children moved out these aging men were left to support themselves, which they often could not do; they had no margin of security. Solitary veterans lacked the supportive family relationships to offer a home or provide a kinship network to serve as a source of caregiving in later life; they would not have sufficiently large pools of kin on whom to rely.

Some of the evidence suggests that parents could and did rely on their adult children, but there were also instances where older adults were abandoned by their children and became social
isolates. Some elderly pensioners chided their children for not remaining to help them. For instance, John McKinney lamented that his own offspring were long gone and not particularly concerned about his plight relating, “my children have all left me.” Without familial support, he had “no other means of subsistence.” Sadly bitter about children who were unwilling to make sacrifices for him, McKinney’s petitioning the federal government for support was obviously a painful last resort. Reduced to utter poverty and abandoned by his family, McKinney, like all of those who were without assistance, sought a pension to survive. It seemed family did not care about him, implying not all children showed respect for their parents.

Scholars continue to unravel questions of shifting power within the family, particularly how the position of youths within the family changed as they became physically stronger and better able to command wages in a society that depended on manpower while their elders became less able physically. In rural communities, the insistence of older people on self-sufficiency and their continued control over family estates delayed the assumption of economic independence by adult children and afforded aging parents a bargaining position for support in old age. Historian John Demos argued that although they were venerated publicly, older people were insecure in private life. Some of the symptoms of insecurity and uncertainty are reflected, for example, in wills where support for a widowed mother was made a condition for the inheritance of family estates. Nevertheless, old people supposedly experienced economic and social segregation far less frequently than they do today, and they retained their familial and economic positions until the end of their lives.78

Economic factors often led to the feeling of less filial obligation among some children of impoverished veterans. Without the solid economic foundations to keep offspring in positions of prolonged dependence, paternal authority in family relations was unable to prolong control over children and keep a family closely knit. Unable to hand over control of any land to children, propertyless and aging parents could not be sure that their offspring would stay, given a free
choice. Rather than a scenario in which the dependence of the children rested upon their parents, even after the children have married and were living under a separate roof, this preliminary investigation suggests that this group of impoverished parents was dependent in some respects upon their children. Unsuccessfully managing to keep children without inheritable land and property, offspring sought better fortunes away from destitute parents.

The lack of options for aid highlights the important role family played in supporting elderly parents. David Alshouse, age sixty-two, was no longer capable of earning a living by labor, "which is his only means of support." He had no children to fall back on for support in old age. Fifty-eight year old Stephen Ballard told the court, "I am not able to support myself by labor and I have no family." That these veterans mentioned they had no other source of support besides their labor points to a relationship between family and caretaking for the aging. It demonstrates the central role children played in assisting the aging revolutionary generation. With no family to rely on, veterans living alone had few other options to receive assistance. One of the few remaining possibilities was the almshouse, upon which a number of veterans were forced to depend. Lacking immediate family, veterans could also draw on kin networks. David Kinsey told the court in 1820 that "for the last three years [I] have chiefly been supported by the kindness of my relations and friends." For those without a spouse, children, or extended family, the outlook was much bleaker.79

Generally, the men who entered the Revolutionary military shared an understanding of masculinity centered on patriarchy. Early modern male ideals about what constituted independent manhood revolved around economic independence, the ability to pass on property to sons, and fathers as the pinnacle of household authority. Rural men considered the ownership of a farm as the prerequisite for the patriarchal ideal and skill in craftsmanship could be a measure of manliness among artisans. Early America's dominant ideal of manhood was the traditional patriarch who devoted himself to governing his family and serving his community. The tenets of
masculinity in early America held that manhood demanded economic and political independence, or “manly freedom.” The consensual core of early American manhood was the conviction that young males should mature into independent family patriarchs who governed female dependents. The traditional patriarch’s performance as husband and father was his main contribution to the community.  

Through the pension applications, it is possible to gauge dimensions of manhood in veterans’ family lives. Common men in later life have been marginalized in the scholarship on gender, as most work on gender in Revolutionary America concerns elite and middling white women. Older men’s masculinities are couched as an invisible part of the dynamics of hegemony or, more simply, ignored. Failing to acknowledge elderly men as a distinct group of men may have homogenized not only adulthood but also theory on masculinity. John Weasey, age fifty-six, gave up his trade as a weaver, performing common labor when he could. The unsteady, unskilled work, though, was not enough, forcing Weasey to admit, “I cannot support my family,” indicating that he earned the family’s income. At sixty-two, Benjamin Watson said he was “no longer able to support myself and family.” Sixty-four year old John Murray echoed the same inability to support his family. Age and infirmity had reduced aging veterans’ physical activities and productive capabilities, and thus their ability to be self-supporting: what could that have meant to these heads of households? 

Parents, and especially fathers, were expected to control their families. Paternal authority was the norm, and was enforced by custom, teaching, civil authority, and economics. Disengaged from work, they lacked the ability to meet certain expectations for masculine behavior, namely providing for family. Civilian male identity included seeing themselves as responsible for the financial support of their wives and children. Regarding family duty, historian Nancy Cott observed that “Marriage was seen as a relationship in which the husband agreed to provide food, clothing, and shelter for his wife.” Fundamentally, “to ‘act like a man,’” Cott explained, “meant
to support one’s wife.” Political scientist Mark E. Kann demonstrated how elites made manhood, which they equated with economic and political independence and dominance over women and other dependents, a prerequisite for republican citizenship. He delineated how the founders idealized the average American male as the “Family Man,” as a father and husband having dependents to govern, protect, and provision, possessed responsibilities whose fulfillment necessitated the orderly behavior the founders deemed essential to republican citizenship. The “Family Man” constituted the bulwark of the republic and was to be self-supporting and to have families. Dependence defined old age for many of these men, which was the opposite of vigorous manhood. Pauperism, after all, meant dependency. As pensioners, moreover, they were dependent on the bounty of another. Dependency contradicted the basic assumptions of a man’s required economic contribution to the family. If postrevolutionary manhood was defined as retaining the head of a household, then poverty, family dissolution, and encumbering kin undermined manly independence. In a male-oriented society, looking at veterans’ dependencies provides a chance to view men in a light other than universal and unchanging dominance.

There are instances, however, where wives were evidently considered to contribute to the family’s sustenance, but veterans frequently characterized their wives as old, infirm, and sickly, thereby unable to contribute to the family’s welfare. William Kernachan stated that his seventy-four year old wife, Grissel, could “do but little towards her own support or mine.” Evidently some families adopted a two-income family model. Veteran-husbands were not the sole providers if women were recognizably contributing to the family economy. Henry Fratt’s sixty-year-old wife, Rebecca, was “not able to do more than attend her household affairs.” Wives carried out the day-to-day routines of maintaining a household, as the extension of wifehood and motherhood over most of the life course continued to engage women in active familial roles into old age. Some of the phraseology displays women’s valuable work and reveals they often served
as economic partners in and around the household. Both men and women worked to support their households, dividing tasks in ways compatible with their perceived roles in life. 83

While the cohort of aging veterans did not exhibit economic mobility, they were geographically mobile. One of the most common responses of the able-bodied poor was to leave in search of employment elsewhere. Many frequently migrated and made multiple moves in search of employment. Perhaps this was an outgrowth of their military service, as the war experience exposed young men to other areas of the United States. The pensions are also an untouched source for mobility studies. At a minimum, the records contain information on the point of entry into Revolutionary War service and the location at which they resided at the time of application; that alone is more than historians know about any other such extensive group for this period. Also, veterans often listed the dates and places of residence since their discharge. The migratory pattern of Continental veterans suggests that movement was particularly strong among laborers or small landholders. Several of the enlistees from Bucks County migrated out of Pennsylvania. After the war, Thomas Corbitt moved to New York, and James Starr migrated to Maryland. John Murray lived in Bristol, Bucks County at the time of his enlistment, but moved to Burlington, a town directly across the Delaware River in New Jersey. Jacob and Thomas Doughty both enlisted in Bucks County. After the war, Jacob moved to Salem County, New Jersey, while Thomas also moved to New Jersey, settling in Gloucester County. Those who migrated out of Bucks County did so in a noticeable mid-Atlantic regional ring; none of the veterans from the sample moved to New England or ventured extensively west or south. 84

A few veterans of the sample moved to Bucks County after the war, and did so even later in life. William Kernachan enlisted in York, Pennsylvania, but settled in Warrington Township, Buck County as early as 1800. David Kinsey enlisted at Baltimore, Maryland, surfacing in Buckingham Township, Bucks County by the 1810 census. In addition, some of those moving to Bucks County were transplanted from just across the Delaware River in New Jersey. Dennis
Cain lived at Trenton, New Jersey at the time of his enlistment, resided in Hunterdon County, New Jersey as of 1786, and by 1800 moved to Falls Township, Bucks County and remained in what would eventually become Morrisville Borough. Francis Carberry enlisted in Mount Holly, New Jersey and was living Upper Makefield, Bucks County by 1812. In 1818 John Hawkenberry resided in Camden, New Jersey; in 1820 he was living in Bucks County. Impoverished veterans without permanent employment or stable home moved their families from place to place in search of economic opportunity. This mobility strongly contradicts assumptions about their utter helplessness. The needy, for their part, were never reduced to objects of passivity; while many of the destitute were powerless to alter their immediate economic circumstances, some could change locations. 85

Effects of Pensions

In the early years of the republic, the government’s pension program generated salient economic and cultural consequences. This section will look at what pensions meant for veterans’ solvency and their celebrated position in early American society. The question remains whether modest pension payments made a difference in the lives of old soldiers. Of the thirty veterans in this sample for whom we know dates of death, the veterans lived on average to almost eighty years of age (see Figures 5 and 6), and received pension benefits for an average of eleven years. Of course, there was variation and the number of years a veteran was on the pension rolls stretched the entire range. Claudius Martin and David Kinsey were each on the pension rolls for only a year before dying in their early eighties. Stephen Ballard died at sixty-seven and John Blumdin died at eighty-one; both received a pension for nine years. For eleven years Francis Carberry was granted a pension preceding his death at age seventy-eight. Eighty-four-year old John McKinney was on the pension rolls for thirteen years at the time of his death. William Kernachan passed away at ninety, the recipient of a pension for twenty years. Andrew Stoll...
collected benefits for twenty-six years before dying at the advanced age of ninety-one. Petitions were granted, but the men and their families remained poor. The levels of wealth indicated in extant probate records suggest that many merely struggled to maintain what they had. Many estate inventories furnish evidence on the standard of living, and they showed that the veterans and their families continued to be people of scant means.

Inventories of personal estates, taken at death, have survived for sixteen of the thirty-seven former Continentals (two additional files were missing). Analysis of the inventories reinforces the conclusion that most of these men and their families remained hard-pressed. The total amount of David Kinsey's inventory was valued at $103.50, but he died $114.07 in debt. In 1824 the estate of Andrew Bryson was valued at a meager $40.15. Francis Carberry's 1831 inventory totaled a trifling $32.04. Jacob Lewis's estate was appraised at $25.56 in 1844. The 1826 inventory for Jacob Doughty amounted to a paltry $5.75. 86

In some instances the pension constituted a sizeable portion of a veteran's inventory, especially for those who reported that they had no income at the time of their application. After his death, Claudius Martin's administration record assessed his wealth at $50.17 in January 1822, but his “pension from the United States” constituted $42.73 or eighty-five percent of that sum. Andrew Stull's “U. S. pension at Philadelphia” made up fifteen percent of his estate in 1846. William Kernachan's 1840 inventory was valued at $251.29. At the time of his death he possessed $48.00 worth of “pension money in hand,” which made up nineteen percent of Kernachan's estate. The estate of Isaac Lewis was assessed at $176.71 in 1821. Of that amount, $38.48 was “a pension due deceased for six months,” representing twenty-two percent of the inventory's valuation. In 1830 John Blumdin's estate was valued at $111.65, with $40 from “about five months pension due at the time of his death.” Pension payments comprised thirty-six percent of his total inventory appraisal. John Murphy's “9 ½ months pay due from the United States” was assessed at $76.00. With an inventory worth $123.36, the pension benefits amounted
to sixty-two percent of Murphy’s estate. Andrew Cramer’s estate was appraised in 1828 at a mean $48.92. His probate records noted that he had a “pension due August 26th 1828” for $45.92. Cramer’s pension stipend, then, constituted ninety-four percent of his estate’s overall valuation. Although members of the sample stood on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder, pensions succeeded in pulling veterans and their families out of a mire of despair. With the aid of benefits these men and their families did not merely trundle along their paths unaffected. 87

Pensions offered some solace to veterans enduring severe economic hardships. Thomas Doughty bluntly admitted, “I need my pension,” telling the court he “drew two years pay which made me quite comfortable.” The stipend evidently helped ameliorate his indigence. For others the issuance of pension payments could be a veteran’s salvation. In Henry Fratt’s case, he was living “in a tenement” owned by the almshouse and barely “maintained myself until I obtained my pension.” Reapplying in 1820, Adam Swager claimed he did not have “any income whatsoever, save the pension which I have hitherto drawn from the United States” under the 1818 act. Thomas Corbitt was initially scratched off the pension rolls for supposedly possessing too much property. Phineas Bradley wrote to vouch for the veteran’s worsening economic situation, earnestly appealing the War Department to reinstate Corbitt on the pension list, otherwise “he will become an object of charity and a town charge.” Federal pensions provided vital assistance, eased the most pressing financial worries of old age, and reduced the likelihood of these individuals going to a poorhouse. 88

Stipends stabilized and bolstered many households, as some veterans could not maintain themselves and their families without income from the pension. For these veterans at the lower end of the economic order, life was almost as precarious with pension benefits as it had been before federal poor relief. Pensions, however, gave veterans access to supplemental income and an alternative option. Numerous ex-soldiers appeared on local poor relief rolls only a year before pension legislation in 1818. They dropped off the almshouse register after 1818, and no members
of the sample were added to the local poor relief rolls after the 1818 act. Clearly, the help of federal pension benefits enabled veterans to avoid the dreaded institution.

Beyond financial matters, pensions symbolically elevated the prominence of veterans and their families in the popular imagination of the new republic. Americans were intensely patriotic in the early republic, and were acutely aware of the Revolutionary generation’s passing. “Another Revolutionary soldier gone!” was a recurring lamentation printed in veterans’ death notices. In December 1817 President James Monroe admonished Congress that with “the lapse of a few years more the opportunity” to provide financial aid for aging veterans “will be forever lost.” This sense of urgency reflected a broader sentiment among Americans that a most extraordinary generation was slipping away to rest in “honor’s laurelled tomb.” The press exalted veterans, exulting them as heroic men “devoted to the cause of the American Revolution.” A local newspaper obituary for George Crow, for instance, lamented that “another revolutionary soldier departed this life.” The death notice further mourned that the deceased “was one of the few [revolutionary soldiers] now remaining.” Levi Starling’s obituary proclaimed, “Thus has another of those who fought for our Independence, left us.” Death notices carried in local newspapers reminded the young nation that “A few years more and all your contemporaries will be mingled with the dust.” The same sense of loss resonated in Congress, as members of the pension committee reported that “the few survivors among us yearly become more few.” Americans in the early national period began honoring veterans such as Thomas Corbitt, “who in his day...rendered important services to his country.” During the war the common soldier endured hardships and fought tyranny for what often seemed to them “an ungrateful people who did not care what became of us.” In many cases, independence carried tremendous personal cost in terms of physical and economic suffering borne by the individual soldier. Veterans were increasingly venerated, and “Freedom’s wreath bedecked his grave” after a veteran passed “into the sleep of death.” Yet, while “the few surviving heroes of the Revolution” were revered for their part “in
the great struggle for Independence,” the young citizens of the United States sensed that for too long the veteran “witnessed the prosperity of a country...which neglected him in his old age.”

In an environment imbued with patriotism, did veterans see themselves as victims, heroes, or self-sacrificing patriots? There was a marked sense of entitlement; veterans believed that they were owed something for their efforts. Andrew Bryson’s daughter, Mary, inquired into the possibility of receiving her father’s bounty land warrant. She “had often heard” her father “say he expected [the land] for his services.” Bryson’s daughter recalled that her father “believed he was justly entitled” to the land. Since the nation was born in an act of bloodshed, many who shed blood in the conflict had the distinct sense that the nation owed them some sort of recognition. As enlisted men the old men had fulfilled their end of the military contract, and all they expected in return was their just due. In addition, such examples illustrate how participants in the Revolution also developed their memories in conjunction with family members. In this instance, a daughter eventually became the guardian of her parents’ particular stories and interpretations of the Revolution.

It was perhaps the disappointment of material goals that most embittered Revolutionary War veterans. The considerable number of them in dire financial straits testified to the fact that the war did not open up many economic opportunities for common soldiers. Many of those who engaged in the service expecting to gain lands and bounty money were sorely disappointed. Frustrated by the government suspending his pension until further review, a discouraged Thomas Doughty said he would rather “die as to beg from the government.” He was quite content to “go down to the grave and ask no more.” Some bore a sense of the costs that the war had thrust upon them, and of the absence of any reparative return.
Conclusion

An understanding of these destitute laboring families enriches the historical knowledge of early American society. These veterans and their families occupied an uneasy place, situated between desperate poverty and a heralded spot in the pantheon of Revolutionary heroes. Close examination of pensions and other public records reveals that the cohort of veterans occupied the lower economic strata and experienced economic derangement and stress in the later years of life. Some common soldiers sustained disabilities in the Revolution, placing them at an acute disadvantage when they attempted to reenter civilian society. Old age often meant enormous physical debility, as they were experiencing the slowdown accompanying the aging process. Many were physically less able to work, placing many in grave economic distress. Age-related changes in physical functioning brought many of these laboring poor to the brink of crisis. Those without property or ample family connections could anticipate a fair share of misery in their final years. At the same time, though, as claimants of a pension act, veterans were recipients of an outpouring of sentimental, nationalistic spirit. The representation of these elderly in popular culture—as “heroes of the Revolution” struggling to remain self-sufficient—shows how Americans in the early national period categorized and compartmentalized a specific social subgroup. They continued to be held in veneration as guardians of the American Revolution.92

How did the lower-class cohort cope with shrinking real wages and economic uncertainty? The classic alternatives from which laboring people in hard times have always chosen are postponement of marriage, limitation of family size, reduction in the standard of living, and acceptance of public and private charity. All of these responses occurred among this sample to some degree. Informal expectation held that old people be supported by their own labor, relatives, charity, and public relief—in that order. These aging poor, though, were decreasingly productive and often could no longer work, and many did not have families to care
for their older relatives. Infirmitiy, liquidation of assets, children struggling to support themselves or aging parents, and heavy debts created a precarious future for veterans and their families. There were instances when family acted as a stabilizing force, taking care of poverty stricken and ailing veterans when governmental charity was not enough or arrived too late. Solitary veterans, men with no immediate family or close kin, fared worse at the end of life—an already uncertain future could deteriorate rapidly without support. In times of unemployment or illness, they lacked a support system to help sustain them. Where poor veterans had dependents, old pensioners tried to maintain the integrity of the family unit in the face of bleak prospects.

These veterans were barely surviving in debilitated old age and admittedly “very poor,” living in marginal circumstances. By 1820 most claimants from the sample no longer owned substantial amounts of real property, and were unable to work at full capacity. Most of these men failed to acquire any taxable belongings, were straddled with debt, and struggled with economic hardship. Yet, pension legislation lessened the need for family help and support from kin. Physically, the group exhibited symptoms of a general pattern of decline, with various age-related decrements in the sensory and motor systems of the body. For the propertyless, debt-burdened, and disabled, the physical signs of diminished functional competence associated with the aging process became an overwhelming handicap.

Veterans of the Revolutionary War received meager compensation for their military contribution, considering the costs that the war exacted from a number of ex-soldiers. Enlisting in the military to improve their situations, poor veterans received help very late in life and in some cases only for a few years. More often than not, pension legislation came too late to spark a real improvement of their situation; it merely sustained them. Nevertheless, for the working poor, the aged, and the infirm reeling from crisis to crisis, any additional income was welcomed and offered some relief.
The example of the veteran and his family can be found in the Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C., file W16227 (hereafter cited as RWPF).

U.S., Congress, House, Report of the Committee on Revolutionary Pensions, Report No. 32, 29th Cong., 3d Sess., 1843, 2-3. "Common enemy" was the phrase used to describe the British in the pension depositions. The spelling and punctuation of the primary sources have been modernized and abbreviations expanded to conform to modern usage.


12 David Hackett Fischer was the first to put forward a sweeping historical treatment of old age. See Fischer, Growing Old. Andrew Achenbaum and Carole Haber have each published significant monographs on the early history of aging in America. See Achenbaum, Old Age in the New Land (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); and Haber, Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America’s Past (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). On the experience of old women in early America, see Terri L. Premo, Winter Friends: Women Growing Old in the New Republic, 1785-1835 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990). Premo underscores the point that women in the early years of the Republic developed ties with other women that sustained and nurtured them over their interconnected lives.


16 On statistics for the proportion of the aged population, see Fischer, Growing Old, 27, 272, 278.

17 On the differences between Pennsylvania Continentals and militia, see John B.B. Trussell, The Pennsylvania Line: Regimental Organization and Operations, 1775-1783 (Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania

18 The differences between regulars and militia is addressed in Lawrence Delbert Cress, Citizens in Arms: The Army and Militia in American Society to 1812 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982).


20 Quoted in Glasson, A History of Military Pension Legislation, 66; and for additional information on the 1818 act, see John P. Resch, “Federal Welfare for Revolutionary War Veterans,” Social Service Review (June 1982), 172-173.


27 Regarding the development of sentiment and the suffering soldier image, see Resch, Suffering Soldiers, 4-5, 83-90.

28 Resch, Suffering Soldiers, x.


30 Resch, *Suffering Soldiers*, ix-x; Emily Jane Teipe, "With Paper Promises in their Pockets: American Revolutionary Veterans in the New Republic" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Riverside, 1997), 105-106.


32 RWPF file S39817; RWPF files S519; General Assembly, Pension Applications in House File, 1709-1903, Record Group 7, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Pa., Box 7, 4-2220 (hereafter cited as RG-7).


John B. B. Trussell found in The Pennsylvania Line, 244-247, in his sample of Pennsylvania regulars that the average age of the soldiers was twenty-five with very few older than thirty. On the agreement among scholars of the Revolution from various interpretative perspectives on the youth (late-teens to early twenties) of the majority of enlisted men, see Robert Gross, The Minutemen and Their World (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 148; Martin and Lender, A Respectable Army, 90; Neimeyer, America Goes to War, 15-24; and Royster, A Revolutionary People at War, 373.


Peckham, The Toll of Independence, 131-134; Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War?" 6-7; and Martin and Lender, A Respectable Army, 198-199.

Peckham, The Toll of Independence, 130; RWPF files S35087; S39928.

For an account of how provincial Massachusetts soldiers refused to live up to the stricter sanitary standards of the regular British Army during the Seven Years' War as an act of resistance to European-style discipline, see Fred Anderson, A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 96-98. RWPF files S40237; S41858.

RWPF files S39820; S9748. C. Keith Wilbur, M.D., Revolutionary Medicine, 1700-1800 (Chester, Conn.: Globe-Pequot, 1966).


46 Allen Bowman, The Morale of the American Revolutionary Army (New York: Kennikat, 1976). For additional information regarding the constant difficulties of meeting the soldiers’ material needs throughout the war, see E. Wayne Carp, To Starve an Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). RWPF files S40756; W2484.

47 On the need to study more closely the demographic and socioeconomic impact of war, see Vinovskis, “Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War?,” 1-3, 29-30.

48 RWPF files S41140; S41145; S42697; W2484; S39928; S40079; S41023; S39956; S39820; S40515; S39699.

49 RWPF files S40866; S42171; S35087.

50 RWPF file S39928; S41140; Bucks County, Pennsylvania Board of County Commissioners, List of Paupers in the Almshouse, 1810-1833; Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Board of County Commissioners, Poor House Register, 1810-1838; RWPF file W7325.

51 RWPF files S40515; W7325; S39699; S40387; S39803.

52 RWPF files S40515; W16227; S40862.

53 RWPF files W1660; W16227; S40666.

54 On the major physical changes that are associated with the aging process and the major diseases that occur in an aging population, see John C. Cavanaugh and Susan Krauss Whitbourne, eds., Gerontology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 91-112.

55 RWPF files S41140; S39699; S41145; S40866; S40862; S42171; S34332.

56 RWPF files S519; S39803; S34441.

57 RWPF files S39956; S35087; W16227.

58 RWPF files S519; W7325; S40079; S40237.

59 RWPF files S40862; S40794; S40806; S39633; S35087; W16227; S34332; S39633; S41299; S41145; S40666; S34332.

60 RWPF files S39928; S41140; S40806; S34441.

61 RWPF files S39928; S40806; S34441; Bucks County Tax Records, Middletown Township, 1812.

62 RWPF file W16227.

63 These figures were compiled from Bucks County Tax Records, Hilltown Township and Falls Township, 1820.

Bucks County Tax Records, Bristol Township, 1813.

New Jersey Tax Ratables, 1768-1846, Trenton Township, Hunterdon Co., 1779; Bucks County Tax Lists, Falls Township, 1800; Bucks County Tax Records, Morrisville Borough, 1812, 1818.

Bucks County Tax Records, Upper Makefield Township, 1812, 1815, 1821, 1825.


A number of historians have noted this caregiving pattern, the threat of dependency, and domestic location—how the elderly were positioned in relation to home and family. See Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five*, 21-30, Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal*, 160-166, Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land*, 30, 75, and Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man*, 171-172, 183-184.


On the issues surrounding control of family land, the delayed independence of sons, and the norm of filial obligation, see Greven, *Four Generations*, 84-86, 89-90, 92, 98-99, 222-258; and Demos, *A Little Commonwealth*. 

79
79. RWPF files S39928; S39956; S39820.


81. RWPF files S40666; S41299; S34441.


85. RWPF files S39803; S39820; S40794; S40806; S39633.

86. Bucks County Estate Files (Wills and Administration Records), no. 4844; no. 5348; no. 6254; no. 8022; and Pre-1901 New Jersey Wills, 1826, 3798Q. For probate records and their use see Gloria L. Main, "Probate Records as a Source for Early American History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 32 (1975): 89-99.

87. Bucks County Estate Files (Wills and Administration Records), no. 4910; no. 8313; no. 7481; no. 4893; no. 6115; no. 4867; and no. 5897.

88. RWPF files S519; S40387; W7325; S40387; and W16227.


90 RWPF file S40756. For a general consideration of veterans asking the government for benefits still owed them, see Emily Jane Teipe, “With Paper Promises in Their Pockets.”

91 RWPF file S519.

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New Jersey Tax Ratables, 1768-1846. New Jersey State Archives, Trenton, N.J.


Pre-1901 New Jersey Wills. Microfilm, New Jersey State Archives, Trenton, N.J.

Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, Microfilm (M804). National Archives, Washington, D.C.


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Mohl, Raymond A. “Poverty, Pauperism, and Social Order in the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1840.” *Social Science Quarterly* 52 (March 1972): 940-954.


Dissertations


Map 1

Illustration 1

*Traps des Ouderdoms* (The Life Cycle of Man and Woman), an engraving by Jan Houwens (Rotterdam). This example depicts an ages-of-life print from the seventeenth century. The epigram beneath reads: "But on the fifth [step] it's just that day in which the sun may not go higher."

Traps des Ouderdoms (The Life Cycle of Man and Woman), an engraving by Jan Houwens (Rotterdam). This example depicts an ages-of-life print from the seventeenth century. The epigram beneath reads: "But on the fifth [step] it's just that day in which the sun may not go higher."

The Life Cycle of Man and Woman, an anonymous print (London, ca. 1773). Rendering of a staircase motif as an image of the life span.

The Life Cycle of Man and Woman, an anonymous print (London, ca. 1773). Rendering of a staircase motif as an image of the life span.

Table 1
Biographical Information on Sample Pensioners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation in 1820</th>
<th>Age of Applicant in 1776</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David Alshouse</td>
<td>Basket Weaver</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Ballard</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Blumdin</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Bryson</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis Cain</td>
<td>Fence Maker</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis Carberry</td>
<td>Common Laborer</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Corbitt</td>
<td>Miller</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Cramer</td>
<td>Cooper</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Crow</td>
<td>Making Oak Shingles</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambert Dorland</td>
<td>Shoemaker</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Doughty</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Doughty</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Edgar</td>
<td>Tanner</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Fratt</td>
<td>Post Fence Maker</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Hawkenberry</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Hogge</td>
<td>Black Smith</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Kernachan</td>
<td>Weaver</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Kinsey</td>
<td>“No occupation”</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Kirk</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac Lewis</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Lewis</td>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claudius Martin</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John McKinney</td>
<td>Shoemaker</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Murphy</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah Murray</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Murray</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Patton</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Scott</td>
<td>“Unable to work”</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Occupation in 1820</td>
<td>Age of Applicant in 1776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Scott</td>
<td>&quot;Unable to work&quot;</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Levi Starling</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Starr</td>
<td>Plasterer</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew Stoll</td>
<td>Weaver</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Stoope</td>
<td>&quot;No trade&quot;</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam Swager</td>
<td>Laborer</td>
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<td>Benjamin Watson</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Weasey</td>
<td>Weaver</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Willard</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>10</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.
Figure 1

Age of Sample Pensioners in 1776

Source: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Figure 2

Age of Sample Pensioners in 1776

Source: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.
FIGURE 3
AMERICAN MILITARY DEATHS
IN WAR, 1775-1973

FIGURE 4
AMERICAN MILITARY DEATHS
IN WARS, 1775-1973
(PER 10,000 POPULATION)

VIETNAM WAR
KOREAN WAR
WORLD WAR II
WORLD WAR I
SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR
CIVIL WAR
MEXICAN WAR
WAR OF 1812
AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Table 2
Wealth Categories for Age Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age at Application</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Court-Assessed Wealth</th>
<th>% $51+</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$1-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 to 54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 59</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 to 64</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 to 69</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 to 74</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 to 79</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 to 84</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.
Table 3
Tax List Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>County Tax Assessment ($)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilltown Twnsp. (N=117)</td>
<td>$5.49</td>
<td>$5.27</td>
<td>$15.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falls Twnsp. (N=119)</td>
<td>$7.19</td>
<td>$3.30</td>
<td>$43.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veteran Sample (N=12)</td>
<td>$0.24</td>
<td>$0.21</td>
<td>$0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bucks County Tax Records, 1820.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Amount of Valuation ($)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilltown Twnsp. (N=117)</td>
<td>$3,524</td>
<td>$3,378</td>
<td>$10,096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falls Twnsp. (N=119)</td>
<td>$4,214</td>
<td>$1,924</td>
<td>$25,376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veteran Sample (N=12)</td>
<td>$139</td>
<td>$116</td>
<td>$320</td>
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Source: Bucks County Tax Records, 1820.
Table 5

1820 Census Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Household Size</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilltown Twnsp. (N=122)</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falls Twnsp. (N=119)</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veteran Sample (N=14)</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Population Schedules of the Fourth Census of the United States, 1820, Bucks County, Pennsylvania.*
Table 6

Household Structures of Elderly Veteran Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Household</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solitary</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjugal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant living with kin</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin with applicant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The totals equal 36 because there were no data in Isaac Lewis's pension file.

Source: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Table 7

Living Arrangements of Elderly Veteran Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map of Household</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living with dependent children</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with adult unmarried daughter(s)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with married son</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with grandchildren</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with wife only</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living alone</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The totals equal 36 because there were no data in Isaac Lewis's pension file.

Source: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.
Table 8
Wealth Categories for Each Type of Household

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Household</th>
<th>Court-Assessed Wealth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitary</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjugal</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant living with kin</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin with applicant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Table 9
Age Structures for Each Type of Household
(N=36)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age at Application</th>
<th>Solitary</th>
<th>Conjugal</th>
<th>Nuclear</th>
<th>Extended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50 to 54</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 59</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 to 64</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 to 69</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 to 74</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 to 79</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 to 84</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.
Figure 5

Age of Sample Pensioners at Death
(N=28)

Source: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Bucks County Estate Files (Wills and Administration Records); Bucks County Intelligencer.
Figure 6

Age of Sample Pensioners at Death
(N=28)

Source: Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files (M804), National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Bucks County Estate Files (Wills and Administration Records); Bucks County Intelligencer.
Vita

Thomas R. Saxton was born in Levittown, Pa. to Sandra Wallover Saxton on March 11, 1977. After graduating cum laude from Holy Ghost Preparatory School, Bensalem, Pa. in 1995, he attended Rider University, Lawrenceville, N.J. While at Rider he was on the Dean's List all four years, a recipient of the Emanuel Levine Phi Alpha Theta Prize and the Emanuel Levine History Research Prize, and a member of several honors associations, including Phi Alpha Theta, Omicron Delta Kappa, the Honor Key Society, Phi Sigma Tau, Pi Gamma Mu, and Alpha Lambda Delta. In 1999, he graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. in History. Awarded a University Scholarship, he entered Lehigh University’s graduate program in 1999. Professionally, he has been a Research Assistant at the David Library of the American Revolution, Washington Crossing, Pa., since 1997, and served as Graduate Assistant in the Department of History during the Fall 2001 semester.
END OF
TITLE