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Institutional History

During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress established basic guidelines for granting service pensions, but left their actual administration to the states. On August 26, 1776, in its first general act regarding pensions, congress resolved to provide half pay for servicemen (including those on naval vessels) who, as a result of disabilities incurred while in the service of the United States, were not capable of earning a living. The payment would continue for the duration of the disability. Subsequent legislation changed the rules for claiming a pension many times over. In most cases changes were beneficial to those who had served, resulting in greater eligibility for claimees. (See Appendix A for list of major pension legislation.) Ultimately, the government established three basic types of pensions:

- 1) disability or invalid pensions - given to those servicemen suffering from disabilities gained in the line of duty
- 2) service pensions - given to those serving a specific amount of time
- 3) widows' pensions - given to the wives of servicemen killed in the war or who served for a specific amount of time

The actual administration of pensions was transferred from the states to the federal government in 1789, soon after of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution.

Specific application procedures varied according to the act under which benefits were sought. Generally speaking, the applicant had to appear before a court of record in his state of residency and describe the service for which he was claiming a pension. To claim a widow's pension, information concerning her marriage to the veteran must be provided. In either case, the application and any supporting papers, certified by the court, were then sent to the official responsible for administering the act under which the claim was made, usually the secretary of war or commissioner of pensions. The applicant was then notified of his status - rejected, approved, or pending eligibility (further proof had to be supplied). If approved, he was placed on the roll and paid semi-annually through federal pension agents.

Bibliography

National Genealogical Society. [Index of Revolutionary War Pension Applications in the National Archives, Bicentennial Edition.](#) Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society, 1976.

Content Note

These abstracts are condensed versions of original federal claims located in the National Archives, Washington, D.C. Arranged alphabetically, they give the applicant's claim number, rank, state, and general service record. Widows' claims are also included in these abstracts.

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