

Learning about Legislation #11 - the rights of Veterans

In honor of Veterans Day, I thought we could look at some of the first legislation in our country designed to create a separate authority to provide for the men who had fought in the War for Independence. This early piece of legislation highlighted today was composed by James Madison, and it passed the General Assembly of Virginia (for this was from before we had a Constitution, in the days of the Articles of Confederation) in 1784. Prior to this bill, individual veterans would have to come before the Assembly and petition for pensions - that is the process referenced in the first sentence of this bill, about another, earlier bill passed in 1782. This new legislation sought to solve that issue.

Bill Enabling the Executive to Pension Disabled Veterans, with Amendments

Whereas the act of Assembly passed in the year 1782 intituled "An Act Concerning Pensioners," which has been continued by several subsequent acts will expire at the end of the present Session of Assembly, and it is expedient that the same should be further continued

Be it therefore enacted that the act intituled An Act "Concerning Pensioners" shall continue and be in force from and after the expiration thereof, so long as any of the persons who have, or hereafter shall receive annual allowances from this Commonwealth in Consideration of Wounds, shall continue to receive the same.

And be it further enacted that the Executive shall be and they are hereby authorized and empowered to put on the List of Pensioners with such allowances as to them shall seem just all Regular or Militia Officers and Soldiers who have been wounded or otherwise disabled in the Service of their Country upon application being made to them therefor. And whereas the said recited Act intituled An Act Concerning Pensioners directs the Courts of the several Counties within this Commonwealth to inquire into the bodily ability of all persons receiving annual Pensions from the Public and to certify to the General Assembly whether in their Opinion they ought to be continued on the Pension List

Be it further enacted that the said Returns shall be made to the Executive who are hereby authorized to continue or discontinue the said allowances as to them shall seem proper.

This piece of legislation is of particular interest because it shows us how the various branches of government can interact to solve problems. The Legislature could not handle the influx of business involved in dealing with veteran pension petitions one by one. So they created an office, answerable to the Executive - this is an early part of our bureaucracy - to handle the issue at hand. But they maintained separate oversight of the process by having "the courts of several counties" assess how the benefits were being provided. This is an early example of checks and balances in action, to serve the needs of wounded veterans who had found for the establishment of the rights we all now enjoy.

Virginia was not the only state to create such a system, and throughout our nation's history many individual organizations were created to assist veterans after each of our country's wars. In 1921 all of those organizations were combined under one umbrella, the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Are there questions that you have about how Congress works, about elections, about voting... or anything to do with government processes? I am looking for topics for future "Learning about Legislation" topics, so please - email me your questions at KierstynPZ@gmail.com - I can't promise that I already know the answer, but I will research the issue and share my findings with our readers in a future segment.