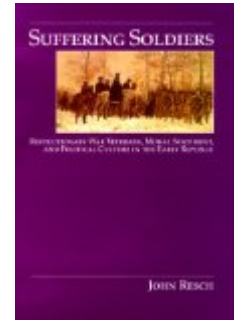


John Resch. *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. xiii + 319 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-232-5.



Reviewed by James Kirby Martin

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Suffering Soldiers grew out of an NEH Summer Seminar conducted under the auspices of renowned Revolutionary War historian John Shy. Originally, Resch wanted to do some sort of quantitative study (not defined in the text) involving the pension records of Revolutionary soldiers, apparently seeking to build on Shy's well-known investigation of "Long Bill" Scott and other Peterborough, New Hampshire, inhabitants who served in the War for American Independence. Going beyond this original intent, Resch has produced a local-national study featuring, on the one hand, an analysis of Peterborough'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 Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 (with a major amendment in 1820). In an effort to tie these two subjects together, Resch conducted a quantitative analysis of 877 randomly selected Revolutionary War pension files with the apparent purpose of comparing the characteristics of Peterborough's soldiery to this larger sample of Continental veterans.

With regard to Peterborough, Resch determined that one hundred local inhabitants enlisted at some point, the vast bulk of them during the first three years of the war. Since the town's population numbered 549 by actual census in 1775, it would seem that virtually all eligible adult males were willing to perform patriot military service. But of what kind? Thirty-one committed themselves to hardened duty in the Continental Army, and 69 agreed to less demanding state or militia service. Resch then goes on to conclude that "when all of Peterborough's soldiers are examined within the context of their households and community," the concept presented by many "modern" historians "that the Continental Army was unrepresentative of society fails to materialize. . ." (pp. 43-44). Indeed, the author is quick to fault the likes of historian Charles Neimeyer, whose study of the Continental Army's soldiery reached the conclusion that the popular notion of the war being fought by "the well-to-do and 'yeoman farmers'" was pure national myth.[1]

Numerous analytic problems, unfortunately, exist with Resch's argumentation. As a rural farm-

ing community, Peterborough did not yet exhibit the extremes of poverty and wealth that characterized more established Revolutionary-era communities, such as large urban centers, where the population was also far more diverse. Thus to claim any representativeness for Peterborough's Continentals, especially based on so tiny a sample, pushes credulity. So few Continentals among Peterborough's soldiery points toward Resch's "apples and oranges" comparison of his soldier group with that of Neimeyer and others. Neimeyer's book, for example, looked at groups of persons who actually served in the ranks of the Continental Army, not in state and militia units. The latter groups rarely performed long-term or out-front service. To include them, as Resch does, in his analysis of Revolutionary soldiers has the immediate effect of weighting his Peterborough sample more toward the middle and upper ranks of that community's socio-economic structure, especially if virtually every eligible male served in some sort of unit, even if for a few days.

Stated differently, if the author had examined the 31 inhabitants of Peterborough who actually performed Continental service as a discrete group, it is extremely likely, based on fragments of information presented in this study, that these folk were much more often from the lower stratum of society. The effect, of course, would be to confirm rather than rebut Neimeyer's analysis. (Unexplained by the author is the curious finding that about half of the 31 Continentals from Peterborough [p. 26] actually signed up for Continental service in other communities, which should lead one to ask why Resch included them in the Peterborough sample in the first place.) In the end, whatever the actual headcount of Continentals coming from Peterborough, their numbers were certainly too small to justify Resch's claim of representativeness in relation to establishing a complete profile of Continental soldiers -- the type characterizing Neimeyer's far more comprehensive study.[2]

Getting beyond Peterborough, Resch devotes the remaining two-thirds of his text to the movement for and adoption of pension legislation that provided some slight financial largesse to economically distressed Continental veterans. To get this program adopted, argues Resch, Americans had to move beyond their public memory of a "people's war" in which a virtuous militia brought victory to a revised version of reality in which Continental soldiers were truly "virtuous republican warriors" as opposed to "'hirelings and mercenaries' who posed a threat to liberty," based on the anti-standing army ideology of the times (pp. 3-4). Once this transformation in popular thinking had taken place, states the author, the Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 could become law, and thousands of aging Continentals, now living in marginal circumstances, would at last receive a statement of gratitude for their sacrifices in the form of modest pension payments.

Resch tells this part of his story in engaging fashion. There is no better discussion regarding the drive for national pension legislation, the debates that occurred in Congress, and the modifications made to the 1818 act two years later after many prospering former Continentals seemed to corrupt the system by filing for pensions. In the end, or at least until the 1830s when pensions would be made available to virtually anyone who claimed to bear arms, however briefly, against the British, Continental veterans who could prove they had virtually no assets or income would be the beneficiaries of this first national pension legislation. Some 20,000 of them appeared in court "to prove their poverty," and about 18,000 succeeded in doing so during the decade of the 1820s (pp. 146, 153).

Concerned as Resch is with concepts like moral sentiment, public gratitude, and conflicting memories of what types of participants (regulars versus militia) assured the martial success of the Revolution, he seems to dance around another important subject. Despite so many examples and a

systematic exploration of some 877 pension files, he does not fully consider whether the poverty of these aging Continental veterans was a reflection of dire economic circumstances before and during the Revolution, or perhaps other factors. Modern historians have found that great numbers of Continentals were in desperate straits before the war. They could well be considered society's hirelings who did the dirty work of performing long-term service and winning the contest, only to be "turned adrift," as Continental veteran Joseph Plumb Martin wrote in his invaluable memoir, "like old worn-out horses" at war's end.[3] Perhaps, then, it was collective guilt rather than gratitude that resulted in pension legislation for these suffering soldiers. Resch might well have explored this as well as other alternative explanations.

Individuals wanting to learn more about the real Continentals would be advised to put much more trust in the work of Charles Neimeyer and John Shy than in the limited findings of Resch. The real value of this book lies in its exploration of the first national wave of pension legislation as encapsulated in the Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818 and its amended version of 1820. On this subject, Resch's discussion represents a solid, worthwhile presentation.

Notes:

[1]. See *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army* (New York, 1996), xiii, 17, 26. Neimeyer derived his characterization of Peterborough's soldiery from John Shy's "Hearts and Minds in the American Revolution: The Case of 'Long Bill' Scott and Peterborough, New Hampshire," in *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York, 1976), 165-79, which represents a more focused evaluation of Peterborough's Continentals than Resch is able to offer. Some might find it curious that Resch chose to set up Neimeyer's rather than Shy's work as his "straw person." Perhaps the author did not want to ap-

pear to disagree with Shy, who helped him initiate this project.

[2]. In his study *Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York, 1970), 104-105, David Hackett Fischer wrote about "[f]allacies of statistical sampling" that "occur in generalizations which rest upon an insufficient body of data--upon a 'sample' which misrepresents the composition of the object in question." This logical fallacy would seem to apply directly to Resch's attempt to see Peterborough's soldiers as anything more than typical of those types of persons living in rural New England communities who served in Continental, state, and militia units.

[3]. See Martin's thoughts in *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*, ed. James Kirby Martin (2nd ed., New York, 1999), 162, and throughout, which tells a story at variance with Resch's regarding public memory in relation to the realities of fighting in the War for Independence and finally gaining pensions in 1818.

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