

Document A

Who is the author of this letter?

John Stagg, a clerk in the War Department. Clerks handled day-to-day correspondence in the office.

What is author asking for?

The letter is prepared for John Blackburn, a man who claims to be a veteran of the War of Independence and has applied for a pension.

The letter is to a physician. Blackburn has been instructed to take Stagg's letter to the physician. Stagg asks the physician to give Blackburn a physical examination.

What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?

Stagg asks the physician to give Blackburn a physical exam to confirm the extent of Blackburn's disability and to report back to the War Department.

What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?

One thing readers may find confusing is the fact that Stagg cannot trust Blackburn's self-reported claim about his disability.

Document B

Who is the author of this letter?

Jonathan Dayton, a congressman from New Jersey, is writing the War Department.

What is author asking for?

Dayton is requesting a pension for Mrs. Dickinson, the widow of a New Jersey man who served as an officer in the Continental Army.

What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?

Dayton states that he remembers Mrs. Dickinson's husband's service, and notes that his death makes it impossible for her to provide proof about his service.

What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?

Dayton goes out of his way to mention that Mrs. Dickinson's husband purchased arms for the soldiery but that he has "reason to think they were converted for public use." This seems to be a reference to the fact that Mrs. Dickinson's did not personally profit from his service in the Continental Army—the implication is that at the end of the war these weapons were returned to the state militias, rather than sold by Mrs. Dickinson's husband for his own personal profit.

Dayton also urges the War Department to consider the widow's situation in deciding whether to award her a pension.

Document C

Who is the author of this letter?

This letter is from Alexander Hamilton (yes, that Alexander Hamilton!) to the War Department.

What is author asking for?

Hamilton is requesting a pension for the widow of a Dutch supporter of the American Revolution.

What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?

Hamilton makes his case for the widow's pension by praising her husband's service. He was an early supporter of the patriot cause, and as Hamilton understands was persecuted as a result of supporting the patriots. According to Hamilton, supporting the American cause was "a link in the chain" of his financial ruin. Her husband's financial ruin appears to have left the widow destitute.

Hamilton urges the War Department to issue the widow a pension based on her husband's contributions to the American cause.

What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?

Students may be surprised that the widow has enlisted a well-known figure from the Revolution to plead her case. Students may also note the language that Hamilton uses (he emphasizes that she is "distressed" and "amiable") in making a claim on America's goodwill.

Document D

Who is the author of this letter?

This letter is from Peter Hagner, a clerk in the War Department office, to Jonathan Dayton, a New Jersey Congressman.

What is author asking for?

Hagner is responding to a letter Dayton sent earlier in the month. In that letter, Dayton requested a pension for a Continental War veteran named Samuel Hull. Hagner explains why the request has been rejected.

What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?

Hagner gives a variety of reasons why Hull's claim has been rejected. Hull has only one witness to the fact that he was wounded; the law requires two witnesses, or the commanding officer or surgeon. Hull has not been able to provide evidence from three free landowning neighbors who can testify to his continuing disability, his means of support, and his "mode of life"; Hull has no evidence of leaving the service.

Hagner states that if Hull's service had been established he would have been entitled to money from the Treasury according to an Act of Congress. As things now stand, Hull cannot receive any money without Congress interfering on his behalf.

What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?

Students may be surprised at the apparent callousness the War Department shows a man claiming to be a wounded veteran. The clerk lists a number of reasons that the applicant's file has been rejected, all of which revolve around the applicant's failure to prove his service and his wound to the satisfaction of the law.

Document E

Who is the author of this letter?

This letter is from Joseph Howell, an accountant in the War Department.

What is author asking for?

Howell is asking for a pension for a Continental Army veteran names Edward Whelan. Whelan had unsuccessfully petitioned New York state for a pension but had been rejected.

What is the nature of the request? What kinds of reasons does the author present to justify the request?

Howell emphasizes that Whelan suffers from rheumatism and other complaints, and that his injuries prevent him from earning a living. New York State refused Whelan's claim and Howell is asking whether Pennsylvania might honor it.

What do you find surprising or confusing about the request or the language the letter-writer uses?

Howell emphasizes that Whelan is in poor condition due to his service. He also stresses Whelan's character: in the Army, Whelan was "respected as a sober, orderly man" and was considered a good soldier.

Students may be surprised that a veteran with a medical condition has been rejected for a pension and is dependent upon a government bureaucrat to plead his case.