

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

11 Memorial of the Officers of the New Jersey Brigade to the Legislature

[*Executive Correspondence*, pp. 143-45.]

Inadequate financial compensation was perhaps the most recurrent complaint heard from commissioned officers and enlisted men alike during the war. The problem was twofold: the legislature failed periodically to readjust the military pay scale (state troops were to receive the same pay as members of the Continental army) to keep pace with spiraling inflation, and the requirement that the soldiers be charged for sundry articles of clothing and supplies consumed ever greater quantities of the rapidly depreciating currency. Things came to a head in April 1779 when fifty officers of the New Jersey Brigade presented their grievances to the legislature in the memorial reprinted below. When the legislators showed no inclination to deal with the problem, twenty-one officers submitted their collective resignation as of May 6 unless "immediate relief" was forthcoming "within three days" and "full assurances" were received that adjustments would be made in depreciated currency "as early as possible." Intercession by General Washington and Major General William Alexander averted the possible disruption of the military establishment; the solons reluctantly awarded £200 for officers and \$40 for soldiers to enable them to pay debts and equip themselves for the impending campaign.

Elizabethtown, April 17th, 1779

It is with great reluctance that the officers of the Jersey brigade undertake to address you.

They had reason to expect that you would (from principles of justice as well as necessity) before this time have taken such measures as would have rendered it unnecessary, but the circumstances of your troops have become such that it would now be criminal to be silent. The Legislature need not be informed that our pay is now only *nominal*, not *real*, that four months' pay of a private¹ will not procure his wretched wife and children a single bushel of wheat. The situation of your officers is worse. The pay of a Colonel² of your regiments will not purchase the oats for his horse, nor will his whole day's pay procure him a single dinner. A common laborer or an express rider receives four times as much as he. It would be superfluous for us to point out all our grievances, they are many, they are great, they are known to you. It is therefore a duty we owe our country, a duty we owe ourselves, to inform you in the most plain and unambiguous terms, that unless a speedy and ample remedy be provided, the total dissolution of your troops is inevitable. The spirit of desertion has already taken place, and has risen to the most alarming height. Combinations of large parties to desert are almost every day discovered, and the utmost vigilance of the officers is not able to prevent it.

The soldiers estimate the money truly, by what it will purchase. They have frequently been heard to say "that it was true British pay was very small, but

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notwithstanding, two days' pay would purchase a quart of rum, and with us a month's pay would not more than do it.['']

In the year 1776 the pay of the officers and soldiers afforded no more than a scanty subsistence. Since that period the currency has depreciated in most articles of life more than two thousand per cent. Are we then to risk our lives in the field of battle, to submit to all the inconveniences of a camp life, to be deprived of the sweets of domestic happiness, and subsist upon one twentieth part of a sufficiency?

Congress, seeing the enormous rise of the necessaries of life, so long ago as December, 1777, recommended to the several states to provide all necessary clothing for their officers and soldiers at prices proportioned to their pay. We had examples of the states both of the southward and eastward complying with this resolution, and in many instances exceeding it.

That your troops are less brave, or have done less duty than any troops in the union, is a position that none have been hardy enough to advance, and why they should be so long neglected is a problem in politics hard to be explained.

Pennsylvania has lately passed some resolves in favor of her troops. Maryland has adopted the same;—some other states have done more, but none of them have done enough.

The families of officers and soldiers should some way be provided for. If our pay was in Spanish milled dollars³ (and that was the contract between Congress and us) we could provide for them; we therefore neither ask nor wish for more than a compliance with the original contract.

Pay us in Spanish milled dollars or give us an equivalent, and our complaints shall instantly cease.

[Signed by twenty-two officers of the First Regiment;
thirteen of the Second Regiment; and fifteen of the Third Regiment.]

1. A private in the infantry was paid \$6.66 per month.
2. A colonel in the infantry was paid \$7.50 per month.
3. The Spanish milled dollar (the old piece of eight) was in general use in America and was adopted as the basic unit for Continental currency because the various states had issued paper money of conflicting valuation.

12 Dr. James Thacher, Describes the Hardships of the Winter Encampment at Morristown

[James Thacher, *Military Journal of the American Revolution . . .* (Hartford, 1862), pp. 180-91.]