Benefits for Older Adults

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Our Founding Fathers didn't give much attention to caring for older adults when they wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Ben Franklin, the oldest of the group, was 70 years old in 1776! He might have been concerned about his personal aging issues, but it is unlikely that his colleagues even gave it a second thought. Washington was 44; Jefferson was 33; Hamilton was only 21; Aaron Burr was 20; Paul Revere was 41; James Madison was 25; and Betsy Ross was 24. There was no Social Security. There were no retirement plans and no IRAs. There were no nursing homes, skilled care facilities or assisted living facilities. Of course, the life expectancy was only 35 to 40 years if you survived infancy. Can you imagine being "elderly" at the age of 40?

In the late 1770s, the average family consisted of 5.7 people. "Who made up a household in Revolutionary America varied, as it does today. Back then, households could include a nuclear family but also extended family, including multiple generations under one roof, indentured servants and enslaved people," writes Tina Donvito in *Reader's Digest.* Those multi-generations were the "old" people like parents and grandparents. Their care was left primarily to the young female members of the household.

Elderly family members in 1776 had many of the same ailments that older adults have today, however, there was little, if any, scientific insight into the causes or treatments of these ailments. When families could no longer care for an elderly relative, the person ended up in an almshouse where care was even more marginal than in the family home. Alex Adler, writes that "the Industrial Revolution brought about significant changes in elder care. As nuclear families became more common and people moved to urban areas for work, the traditional family support system further eroded." During the 19th century the first nursing homes and long-term care facilities emerged.

Professional home health care started in 1893 with the establishment of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York. Established by Lillian Wald and Mary Brewster, the organization became one of the first to provide nursing care in people's homes when the family could not provide the care. By 1900, old age homes and chronic care facilities began to increase. In 1891 Anton Reymann established a retirement home for women in Wheeling. The residents were mostly German immigrants who had worked in the homes of wealthy Wheeling families. Upon retirement, many did not want to return to Europe and so Mr. Reymann established the "Home for Aged and Friendless Women" which became the Altenheim Retirement Community.

The first government sponsored benefits program for the elderly actually started during the Civil War. Widows, orphans and those who were disabled in the war were entitled to a federal pension. Benefits were not extended to those who fought on the Confederate side during the war. In 1906 old age became a qualifier for receiving Civil War pensions whether or not a person had been injured in the war. By 1910, 90% of surviving Civil War veterans were receiving a government pension. This was extended to include surviving widows of veterans and created a flurry of marriages between very young women and Civil War veterans. Surviving widows were still receiving pensions as late as 1999!

Starting with the Great Depression, care for the elderly made dramatic advances. Next month we will look at care for the elderly in the United States since 1930.