

North Carolina's Revolutionary War Uniforms





The following is a digital scan of a pamphlet produced for use during the donation ceremony of a carefully reproduced NC Revolutionary War uniform to the North Carolina Museum of History.

Noting that the Museum had no representation of NC Revolutionary soldiers, the North Carolina Historical Reenactment Society offered to manufacture and donate a representative uniform based on the period techniques and appropriate materials using the most current research.

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North Carolina's Revolutionary War Soldiers - 1776

This figure represents a private soldier of one of the six North Carolina Regiments authorized at Halifax on April 13, 1776 for service in the American War for Independence. These were the first of North Carolina's Revolutionary era troops to be "uniformed" in the normal sense of the word.

The 2 regiments of 1775, which were recruited for only 1 year's service, were issued only "hunting shirts" and "spatterdashes" reflecting the belief that the war would not last more than a few months.

Realizing that the war was not going to be resolved as quickly as everyone had hoped, in 1776, the Continental Congress requested that North Carolina provide four regiments. North Carolina reached farther than requested and authorized six regiments. In August 1776, North Carolina ordered "cloth short coats, breeches, stockings, shoes and shirts..." from the firm of Caldwell and Meese in Philadelphia. Upon arrival in mid October, the manifest listed:

*592 drab coats faced with blue,
608 brown coats faced white,
476 brown coats faced red,
311 drab coats faced red, and
560 "mixt cloth" coats faced with red, along with
16 blue coats faced drab, and
16 white coats faced brown.
506 pairs of drilling breeches
500 "oznaburg" shirts*

Note: During this part of the 18th century, "drab" was a woolen fabric in its natural state which was yellow-brown in color.

The "facings" of a coat included its lapels, cuffs, and cape collar. These trim items were in distinctive colors to help identify the wearer's regiment. Note the presence of a small number of "reversed color" coats, which have the coat and trim colors reversed. These would have been issued to musicians, identifying them as such.

Unfortunately, we don't know which of the six regiments received which color combinations. For the purpose of this figure we have arbitrarily selected the brown coat with red trim with the accompanying white breeches and waistcoat.

While in the midst of our struggle for independence, it's not surprising that few records were kept with any details regarding clothing and accouterments. Further, there are neither "standard" patterns to refer to, nor many artifacts to peruse. Typically, the equipment issued to the army was a mixture of left overs from earlier periods augmented by items manufactured in small quantities on a local basis, purchased abroad, or, when available, captured from the British. It's unlikely that complete uniformity in clothing and accouterments was ever achieved within North Carolina's regiments.

Due to this lack of specific information, many of the clothing and accouterment items on this figure, while authentic reproductions of the period, and based on extant artifacts, are conjectural for use by any particular North Carolina unit.

So, this figure must be considered as an educated "best guess", based on current research rather than a definitive statement of how one of the better equipped soldiers might have appeared shortly after the uniform issue of October 1776.

While wearing the 1776 issue uniforms, the North Carolina Regiments participated in the Defense of Charleston, the battles of the Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth as well as spending one intervening winter (1776 - 1777) at Charleston and one (1777 - 1778) at Valley Forge.

In September, 1778, a shipment of French manufactured uniforms arrived in the colonies, a gift of the French government. These uniforms were allocated by lottery. North Carolina's troops were allowed an early selection of the new French uniforms. They chose blue coats with red facings. The coats were possibly a full length regimental rather than the short "coatee" that was issued in 1776. A little over a year later, in December of 1779 these uniforms also were in rags.

We have no documentation that the North Carolina troops, as a whole, were ever "uniformed" again during the war. However, as supplies of clothing were available from the colonies they were issued to the troops.

By late 1779, the majority of North Carolina troops were probably clad in hunting shirts and "overalls", which were extended knee breeches, reaching all the way to the foot where they formed a gaiter around the shoe, which was held in place by a strap that passed under the instep.

In late 1779, Congress saw fit to issue regional uniform regulations, proposing

that the North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia troops would wear a full length blue regimental with blue facings with white trim around the button holes. This was to be accompanied by white overalls, and a white waistcoat. Unfortunately, there are no records of any such uniforms ever being constructed or issued to the North Carolina troops, although, in 1780, some paroled officers at Halifax wrote to the state and requested that they be issued cloth to make up uniforms of this type.

On May 12th of 1780, all the North Carolina Continental Regiments then in the field were surrendered to the British Army at Charleston, SC. North Carolina would have virtually no regular troops in the field until February of 1781, when members of the North Carolina militia were drafted into Continental service. By statute, these draftees weren't issued uniforms or equipment.

In 1783, as the war neared its end, Congress adopted a standard uniform for the entire American Army. This was to be a full length blue regimental coat with red facings, white overalls and waistcoat. There is no record of this uniform being issued to any of the North Carolina regiments that were in the field at that time.

In 1784 the Continental Army was disbanded except for a few men left to garrison several fortifications. North Carolina's surviving Continentals came home wearing whatever accumulation of clothing they had acquired.

The following section describes the various items of clothing and accouterments found on the figure.

Uniform and Clothing:

Hat. the "cocked" hat (never called a "tricorne" in the 18th century) sits with the front point over the left eye. This positioning allows the musket to be carried on the left shoulder without striking the hat. In 18th century manuals of arms, the musket wasn't carried on the right shoulder as it is today.

Hats were made of either fur or wool felt. The best hats were made of beaver fur felt, and were quite expensive. This less expensive hat, typical of one that would have been issued to the private soldier, is made of wool felt. The decoration on the side of the hat is known as a "cockade". After June 1780, upon the arrival of the French General Rochambeau at Newport, RI, it became popular among American troops in the north to add a bit of white to the black cockade, to symbolize the alliance between France and the US (the French wore white cockades).

However, the North Carolina Continentals most likely never wore the "Alliance cockade", it having made its appearance after the surrender of the North Carolina Regiments at Charleston and nearly a year after their service in the north where they might have encountered the French Army. They certainly didn't wear them during the 1776 period this figure represents.

Stock. the black leather neck piece is called a "stock". It could also be made of various materials such as linen, horsehair, velvet, etc. A popular, but undocumented, story is that the term "leatherneck", a jargon phrase for a US Marine, comes from their wearing heavy leather stocks to ward off sabre cuts. The stock was tied or buckled in the back. Our example is buckled.

Shirt. the enlisted soldier's shirt was usually made of linen. An officer's shirt might have been of a finer linen fabric. The 18th century shirt was much longer than modern shirts, the hem reaching nearly to the wearer's knees. It has no "yoke" across the back. It has "drop" sleeves and thread buttons.

It was the basic undergarment, as no other form of underwear was worn. A gentleman would never have appeared in public without some garment over his shirt and without some form of neckwear, such as the stock.

Waistcoat. the vest-like garment is called a waistcoat. The combination of

waistcoat, breeches, and a coat made up a suit... a forerunner of the three piece suit of today. Charles II of England is given credit for popularizing the three piece outfit.

Early in the 18th century waistcoats were very long, reaching the knee in some cases. Often they had sleeves as well, making them an inner coat. By the time of the Revolution, the bottom hem was approaching the waist line. It would continue to shorten until, at the end of the century it was cut off sharply at the waist.

Breeches. often referred to as "smallclothes" in polite company, the breeches had a very full seat to allow the wearer to sit or squat down without ripping the seams. (The knee bands that fasten below the knee don't allow the movement of material that modern men's pants do.)

These breeches have a fall front, a change that had come about at mid century. The knee bands were held tight with small buckles or buttons, or even ties in some cases. The knee bands also help hold up the stockings. The size of the waist band of the breeches can be changed with a gusset and tie in the rear, allowing about 4" to 5" of adjustment.

Stockings... Stockings were worn with knee breeches. They were sometimes covered with "gaiters" or "spatterdashes" which were made of heavy cloth. These covers protected the stockings from rips and tears. The stockings on the figure are hand knitted from hand spun natural wool.

Garters... garters served to hold the stockings up. While civilians might wear their garters above or below the knee, or even depend on the breeches strap to do the job, the military commonly wore black garters below the knee in the British military fashion.

Shoes... shoes were produced on a single, straight last, making both the right and left shoe identical. Legend says that it may have been the practice to alternate shoes each day to equalize wear but analysis of excavated specimens don't support this theory. The common soldier's shoes were made with the flesh side of the leather out giving them a suede appearance.

Under the best of circumstances, the soldier would use a "blackball" on his shoes, coating them with a mixture of wax, lampblack, tallow, and other substances to help preserve them and make them somewhat waterproof. Shoes wore out quite rapidly due to their simple construction and poor fit. Shoes

could be either tied or buckled. These have simple brass buckles.

Spatterdashes... spatterdashes covered the tops of the shoes and the ankle, preventing dirt and gravel from getting into the shoes. They button up the side and are held by a strap running under the instep. These were most likely the types of "gaiters" issued to the regiments of 1775. The other possibility would be a style that reached the knee.

The Regimental coat... Our coat, breeches and waistcoat are made from hand "fulled" wool. "Fulling" is a shrinking process that makes the weave tighter, making the cloth stronger and somewhat waterproof.

The coat was normally lined with either wool or linen. It was to be worn year round. It was uncomfortably hot to wear during the summers here in the South.

The trim of contrasting colors, collar, facings (lapels), and cuffs served to identify specific regiments. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, we don't know which North Carolina Regiments wore which facing colors from the selection ordered in 1776. This coat reproduces one of the patterns listed in that order; a brown short coat or "coatee" with red facings. Both the brown and the red colors on the mannequin were chosen to represent colors achievable with 18th century dyes.

To provide more warmth during the winter, the facings can be unbuttoned and folded across each other to form a double breasted coat. Many of the portraits of officers of the Revolutionary War period show the "buttoned over" coat.

The front corners at the hem are turned up and stitched. These are called "turnbacks". The appliqued hearts are merely decorative reinforcements. They have no symbolic meaning.

Coat Buttons... North Carolina, alone among the 13 rebelling colonies, chose to include the state initials with the intertwined USA on the buttons. There are less than 1/2 dozen originals of this design button known to be in existence today. One of these buttons is in the North Carolina Museum of History collection. It was uncovered in excavations at Halifax, NC, where the North Carolina Continental Troops were trained.

We don't know at what time the USA/NC button came into use. Early documentation speaks of white metal buttons without specifying a pattern. We

can only say that they came into use some time after the Declaration of Independence in July 1776, hence the "USA" designation.

The late 1779 uniform regulations mention a button with the state initials to be worn on the hat in the center of the cockade. Some have concluded that the USA/NC button was produced for this purpose; however, the known examples of USA/NC buttons represent several sizes. The example in the NC Museum collection, for instance, is of "waistcoat" size and would not be appropriate for a hat. And, like the entire uniform specification of 1779, there is no documentation that a NC hat button was ever issued. Until further research provides more information, the origin and chronology of the USA/NC button must remain somewhat a mystery.

Arms and Accouterments:

Bayonet Sling and Bayonet... this bayonet, a reproduction of the British style, is 17 1/2" long. It is triangular in cross section, producing a wound that was very difficult to sew up.

The bayonet scabbard is of the style of the French and Indian War, representing the older equipment that might have been found in colonial armories and issued to North Carolina's troops. The bayonet sling represents the American practice of wearing the bayonet belt over one shoulder in contrast to the waist belts worn by many British troops.

Early in the war, British troops with bayonets so intimidated the untrained Americans that they often ran them off without firing a round. By the end of the war both sides used the bayonet extensively in combat.

Cartridge Box or "Cartouche Box"... the cartridge box was a leather container designed to hold between 15 and 36 paper cartridges, which were paper tubes each containing a musket ball and a charge of black powder.

To load and fire the musket, a cartridge was extracted from the cartridge box, then the end of the cartridge was bitten off, a small amount of the powder contained in the cartridge was poured into the pan (part of the flintlock) on the musket, the remainder of the powder was poured down the barrel, then the remaining paper and ball were rammed down on top of the powder, using the ramrod.

In firing, when the trigger was pulled, the hammer (called the "cock" in the

18th century) fell forward, causing the flint to strike the "steel", causing sparks and simultaneously exposing the powder in the pan. The sparks ignited the powder, which set off the main charge in the barrel, communicating the fire through a small hole in the side of the barrel, known as the "touch hole."

American cartridge boxes were often inferior to those used by the British in that they were not as well constructed, allowing the cartridges to become wet and useless when it rained.

Knapsack / Haversack... the knapsack served to transport all the private soldier's personal belongings. These would be a few spare garments, some items for cleaning and maintaining gear and equipment, and, perhaps, several personal items such as a book.

Blankets were difficult to come by and were prized possessions. The blanket fastened to the knapsack is handwoven wool in an 18th century pattern.

It was common practice in the 18th century to paint unit designations on the flap of the knapsack. Following this practice, the figure has "No. Carolina" and "6th Regt" painted on its knapsack flap. The flap itself has been painted with red ochre to offer a bit of waterproofing for its contents.

The knapsack often doubled as a "Haversack" which was intended to carry a soldier's rations. Rations were issued to a "mess" of men.. usually 6 soldiers. Each mess was to be issued a kettle for cooking. The intent was that most foods would be boiled in these kettles. As the kettle was heavy and awkward to carry, they were often discarded, leaving the men with no cooking implements at all.

As a result, one of the more common items eaten was "firecake", which was a mixture of flour (or cornmeal) and water in a thick paste which was formed into a cake which was then placed on a hot rock or into the ashes to cook.

There were neither meal times nor mess halls in 18th century armies. The men cooked when they could, carrying any uneaten or uncooked food with them in their haversacks.

Canteen... a tin canteen was a common accessory for Revolutionary era soldiers. This canteen is made in a common British pattern of the French and Indian War period representing older military gear that was often the only choice available to the colonies.

Musket... the musket is a reproduction of the British "Short Land Pattern, New Model" musket which made its appearance about 1772. It's familiarly known today as the Second Model "Brown Bess". (The term Brown Bess doesn't appear in print until after the Revolutionary War. We don't know exactly what the common soldier called it during the war, although the terms "King's Arm" and "service musket" are found in some period sources.)

The musket is a "flintlock" with a 42", smooth bored barrel of .73 caliber. It weighs about 10 pounds without the bayonet affixed. It fired a 1 ounce round lead ball.

Due to its smooth bore construction and sub-caliber ball, it was accurate only to about 80 yards. This inherent inaccuracy was one of the main reasons for troops standing in line and firing in volleys, as this made the most effective use of the weapon. Contrary to popular belief, with only occasional exceptions, both the American and British forces used linear volley fire as their primary tactic throughout the war.

A well trained soldier could fire his musket about 3 times per minute on a continuous basis. Each round was loaded from a paper cartridge (see the cartridge box section for a description of cartridges and loading.)

Affixed to the musket is a leather sling of the style of the French and Indian War period.

Illustration: The Clothing Issue of 1775

The only items issued to the NC Continental troops in 1775 were the fringed linen "hunting shirt" and the canvas "gaiters" that cover the ankles.

This soldier is armed with a British musket, perhaps one from the French and Indian War period.



Illustration: The Uniform of 1776

The NC Continental uniform of 1776 and its accouterments are described in detail in this pamphlet. Note the continuing use of the short gaiters and kneebreeches. The coatee is mid-thigh length. The various color choices of this uniform were:

Infantry Coats:

*Brown coats faced white,
Brown coats faced red,
Drab coat faced with blue,
Drab coats faced red,
"Mixt cloth" coats faced red*

Musician's Coats:

*Blue coats faced drab,
White coats faced brown.*

The British style musket was still the most common arm.

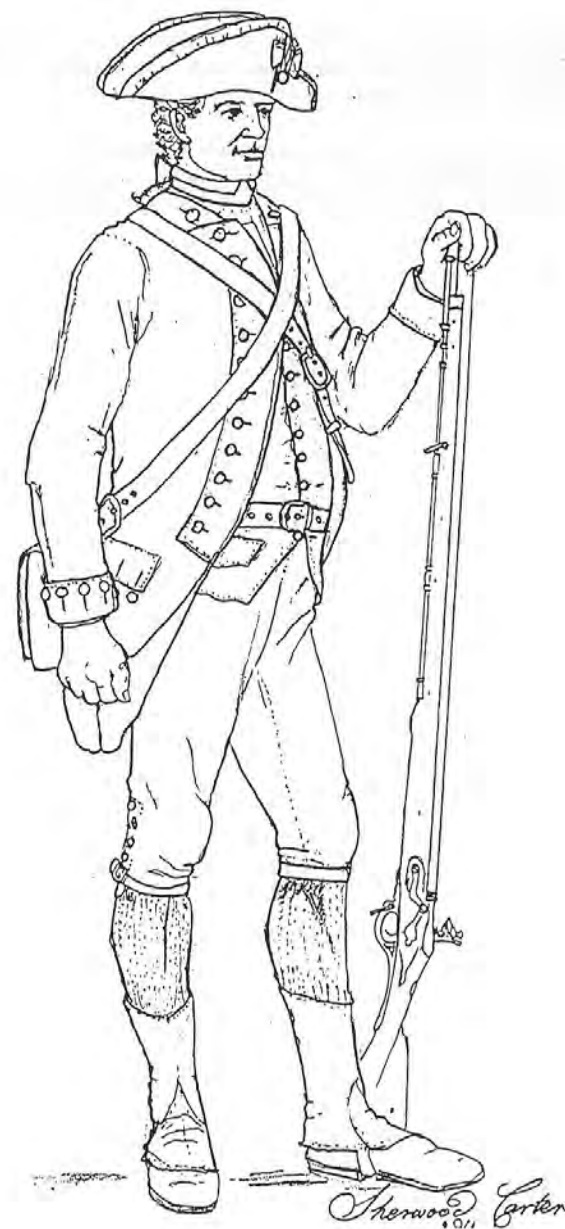


Illustration: The French "Gift Uniforms" of 1778

This illustration shows the adoption of "overalls" to replace kneebreeches and gaiters. The French-made coat is thigh length with a vertically slit and buttoned cuff. The NC Continentals had blue coats with red trim.

Along with the uniform came a supply of French Muskets from prior conflicts, most commonly the Model 1763 and 1766 from the armories at Charleville and St. Etienne. Our illustration shows the 1763 Charleville.

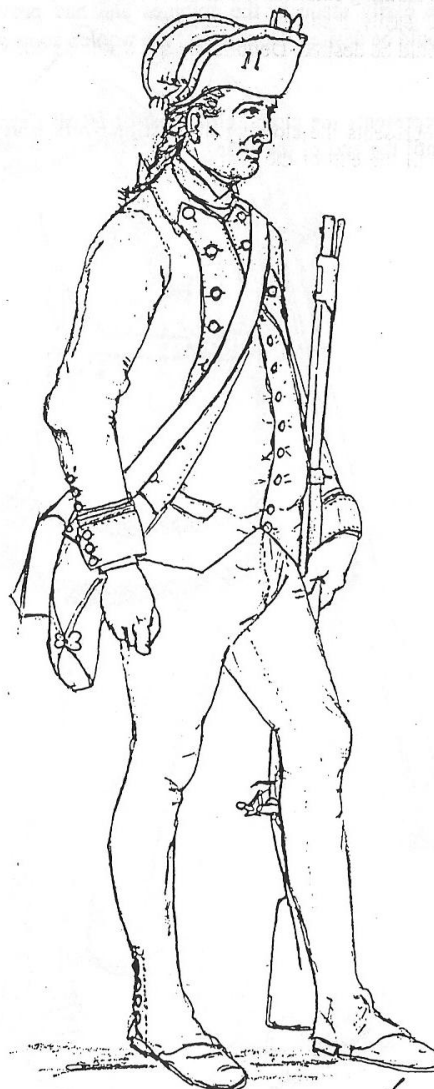


Illustration: The "late war common dress"

Although it was never an official uniform, from 1778 on, many Continental soldiers wore clothing similar to this illustration. The linen "hunting shirt" and overalls were easily made in the colonies and had proved as serviceable a uniform as could be desired. Doubtlessly the woolen coats were warmer during the winter.

This figure represents the clothing of most of North Carolina's Continentals from 1778 until the end of the War.



Illustration: The Continental Congress' Regulation Uniform of 1779

In late 1779, the Continental Congress ordered a standard uniform for the North Carolina troops. It was to be a blue full length coat (the hem at the back of the knee pan) with blue facings. The button holes were to be trimmed with white "lace". The overalls and waistcoat were to be white.

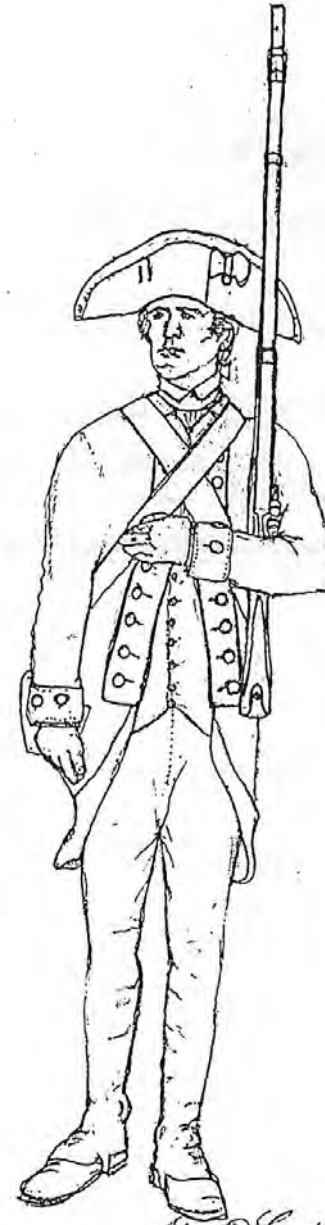
There is no record that such uniforms were ever issued to North Carolina's Continentals.



Illustration: The Continental Congress' Regulation Uniform of 1783

In 1783 the Continental Congress ordered a common standard uniform for the entire Continental Army. It was to be a full length blue coat with red facings. The overalls and waistcoat were to be white.

As is the case with the 1779 Regulation uniforms, there is no record that such uniforms were ever issued to North Carolina's troops.



*Howard Carter
'94*

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