

Clothing on the Frontier

Clothing in the backcountry of North Carolina and Virginia differed from that of the tidewater region and that of New England. For the most part men wore shoes, stockings, breeches, shirts and waistcoats. But the hunting shirt or frock with a cape was more common than a regular coat or frock. The hunting frock was linen or linen wool mixes and on rare occasions buckskin. It was open in front with a cape about the shoulders and adorned with fringes.¹ As J.F.D. Smythe says in his journal “ a hunting shirt, somewhat resembling a waggoner’s frock, ornamented with a great many fringes”². The Hunting shirt was held shut with a leather belt or woven sash in which he would carry his knife and tomahawk. Farmer’s smocks or wagoner smocks would have also been worn. And contrary to popular belief they did not wear their waistcoats over them. These were used to keep their shirt and waistcoat clean, so they were used as an outer garment.

Men also wore leather breeches as well as linen ones. And they also wore hemp or linen trousers. Charles Woodmason an Anglican minister traveling in the backcountry at the out brake of the American Revolution states in his journal “ The men with only a thin shirt and a pair of breeches or trousers on – bare legged and bare footed”.³ In some cases they wore the breechclout. Henry Wilson’s account of George Rogers Clarks Piqua Campaign states that “ Harrods men wore hunting shirts breech clouts and leggings some linen and some leather.”⁴ The breech clout was made of leather, wool or linen strip of cloth “nearly a yard long, and eight to nine inches broad. This passed under the belt before and behind, leaving the ends for flaps hanging before and behind over the belt”.⁵

Shoes were replaced by moccasins or shoe packs. A shoepack was a kind of moccasin with a hard leather sole attached.⁶ Daniel Trabue the quarter master sergeant at Logan’s Fort in Kentucky mentions in his journal that he was wearing shoes with silver buckles on them, and slipped out of them when he was being chased by Indians.⁷ The legs were covered with buckskin or wool leggings. These being wrapped around the leg and stitched up the side usually a hands width above the knee, and held up by thongs tied to the breechcloth belt.⁸

Hats were a very important item to the frontiersman. They showed his social status and also protected him from the elements. They wore round farmer’s hats and tri corner hats and a few military cocked hats. Bedinger was seen in Kentucky wearing a Cocked hat.⁹ At the siege of Boonesborough William Bailey Smith was seen “dressed in his best military uniform, with scarlet coat and plumed macaroni hat”¹⁰. The hat also served to keep the frontiersmen from being mistaken for an Indian and shot. This happened quite a few times in Kentucky. One in particular when some men were traveling from Boonesborough to

¹ Notes on settlements and Indian wars. Joseph Doddridge copy right 1912 John Ritenour

² Smythe, J.F.D. A Tour in the united States of America New York Times Press 1968

³ The Carolina Backcountry on the eve of the revolution. The university of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill 1953

⁴ Draper manuscripts, Reel 23 - Series J, Vol. 9, pp. 101-104

⁵ Notes on settlements and Indian wars. Joseph Doddridge copy right 1912 John Ritenour

⁶ *ibid.* Doddridge.

⁷ Westward into Kentucky the Journal of Daniel Trabue. University Press of Ky. 1981

⁸ Notes on settlements and Indian wars. Joseph Doddridge copy right 1912 John Ritenour

⁹ Draper manuscripts #1A:46 Cincinnati Ohio Library

¹⁰ Daniel Boone by John Mack Faragher. Henry Holt Coy 1992. Page 186.

Lexington by horse, they removed their hats and replaced them with scarf's because they were afraid the tree branches would knock their hats off. While riding along some other settlers on foot came across them and mistaking them for Indians because they "had no hats on" they opened

Fire killing one.¹¹ The Indians captured Daniel Trabues brother and they took his hat, Daniel wrote, "My brother said that when he lost his hat he was alarmed".¹²

In the winter they would wear wool caps and fur caps. These were the Canadian hat of wool and trimmed with fur like some pictures of Benjamin Franklin show him wearing. They would also wear a great coat or a watch coat or even an Indian match coat.¹³ A match coat was a short blanket pinned at the neck and tied around the waist with a belt. Wool leggings and Daniel Trabue writes "We made socks to go over our shews with Buffelo skins putting the wool inside and we had woolen gloves".¹⁴

And now a word for the woman's clothing. Charles Woodmason writes "The women bareheaded, barelegged, and barefoot with only a thin shift and under petticoat – Yet I can not break them of this". "The young women have a most uncommon practice.....They draw their shifts tight as possible to the body, and pun it close, to shew the roundness of their breasts, and slender waists. They come to service in their shifts and short petticoat only, bare footed and bare legged—without caps or handkerchiefs—dressed only in their hair."¹⁵ They also would wear linsey petticoats and bed gowns and a handkerchief around their neck. They went bare footed in the summer and in colder weather they would wear moccasins, shoepacks or coarse shoes.¹⁶ Stays were seldom worn in the backcountry.¹⁷ Nichols Cresswell an Englishman traveling in America in 1775 and 1776 writes of the backcountry women of Virginia "..... Without shoes or stockings and the girls without stays". He also writes "few but none of them wear stays in the summer and there are but a few that wear them constantly in the winter".¹⁸ This shows that women in 18th century backcountry America did not wear stays all the time. In conclusion as for everything we do we must be aware of social status and be regionally specific with our impressions and documentation. This means use documentation for the area you are portraying.

**You humble servant,
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¹¹Draper manuscripts. #22C :9 page 18

¹² Westward into Kentucky the Journal of Daniel Trabue. University Press of Ky. 1981

¹³ Journey to Kentucky in 1775 James Nourse. The Journal of American History Vol.19 1925.

¹⁴ Westward into Kentucky the Journal of Daniel Trabue. University Press of Ky. 1981 page 74.

¹⁵ The Carolina Backcountry on the eve of the revolution. The university of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill 1953

¹⁶ Notes on settlements and Indian wars. Joseph Doddridge copy right 1912 John Ritenour

¹⁷ Notes on settlements and Indian wars. Joseph Doddridge copy right 1912 John Ritenour
The Carolina Backcountry on the eve of the revolution. The university of NC Press Chapel Hill 1953

The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell by Nicholas Cresswell the Dial Press. New York 1924

¹⁸ The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell by Nicholas Cresswell the Dial Press. New York 1924