

“...trimmed & ornamented with fringe”¹
Fringe on the Elusive American Hunting Shirt
N. T. Hurst



“a Virginia Rifleman” {drawn circa 1777}
(Photo Courtesy of Richard St. George Collection, Harlan Crow Library.)

Warfare raged across North America in the mid 18th century, helping to give birth to a new fashion developed within the American Colonies and truly American fashion, the hunting shirt. This shirt was split up the front and sometimes belted closed, caped around the shoulders and festooned with fringe on all its edges. Several questions remain unanswered about hunting shirts, including details of their origin and construction, but this monograph centers on the garment’s fringing. The reason for the use of fringe may be unanswerable, lost to history, but how it was constructed and what textiles were used for fringing may be gleaned from the few surviving original examples.

When John Ferdinand Smyth completed his tour through the newly formed United States in 1784, he remarked on the use of fringe on hunting shirts worn by inhabitants of the backcountry. Smyth noted that “the whole dress is very

¹ Boston Gazette, published as The Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal, April 27th 1789, “A correspondent informs us, that the boat which is to receive his Excellency General Washington, at Elizabeth-town, and convey him to New-York is completed. She is 47 feet keel, and row with 13 oars on each side, to be manned by the pilots of New-York, who are to be dressed in white frocks and black caps, trimmed & ornamented with fringe”.

singular...being a hunting shirt, somewhat resembling a wagoner's frock, ornamented with a great many fringes."² He also commented on the apparent importance of the fringe:

according to the number and variety of the fringes on his hunting shirt...he estimates his finery, and absolutely conceives himself of equal consequence, more civilized, polite, and more elegantly dressed than the most brilliant peer at St. James.³

Hunting shirts were limited to the backcountry settlements stretching from Pennsylvania to the Carolinas until the American colonies found themselves plunged into warfare with England. After a recommendation from General George Washington, the Grand Congress in Philadelphia adopted these "cheap and convenient" shirts in 1776, and their use became widespread.⁴ The presence or absence of fringe on these shirts or trousers often became a descriptor when looking for runaways or military deserters. In July 1775 Alexander Crage ran away in Pennsylvania wearing "a brown hunting shirt with a large cape, and long fringe."⁵ Another man from Pennsylvania deserted in October 1776 from Captain Matthew Smith's company wearing a "brown hunting shirt and trousers, without fringe."⁶

Currently there are three known surviving hunting shirts made from woven textiles. The only extant shirt from the Revolutionary period survives at Washington's Headquarters, Newburgh, New York. The wearer, Captain Abraham Duryea of the Dutchess County Militia, allegedly wore this hunting shirt at the Battle of White Plains. This shirt has not only an exorbitant amount of fringe running down all edges, and including a zig-zag pattern at the hem, but also rosette tufts and intertwining hearts of fringe on the cape.⁷

Another hunting shirt from the Green County Historical Society in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania is more conservative in its fringing. Michael Crow, a resident of Green County, supposedly wore this shirt during the Revolution, however he was born in 1769, and was probably too young for military service. The shirt exhibits a shawl collar, which is more indicative of the late 18th Century or the early 19th Century.⁸

²John Ferdinand Smyth Stuart, *A Tour of the United States of America* (Dublin: Printed by G. Perrin, 1784),137.

³ *Ibid.*,138.

⁴ General Orders, Jul. 10, 1775. in *George Washington Papers*, Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html> (Accessed April 9, 2009).

⁵ The Pennsylvania Packet published as Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet or, the General Advertiser, July 24, 1775.

⁶ The Pennsylvania Gazette, October 9, 1776.

⁷ Henry M. Cooke IV, "Research Notes on the Design and Construction of the Hunting Frock Worn by Captain Abraham Duryea, Ca. 1776" (Washington's Headquarters Historic Site, Newburgh, New York, photocopy), 1-10.

⁸ Byron Smith, "White Savages in Hunting Shirts: The Rifleman's Costume of National Identity and Rebellion in the American Revolution" (Master's thesis, University of Richmond, 2000), 103.



Pulled fringe on reproduction hunting shirt
(Photo Courtesy of Neal T. Hurst)

Both the Duryea and the Crow hunting shirt use the technique of taking lengths of “cabbage” or scrap from the garment that are cut on the straight of grain, folded and pressed in half, stitched onto the edges of the shirt, and then by pulling out the threads from raw edge, creating the fringe. However, a hunting shirt that has recently surfaced at public auction and is currently owned by the City of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, has a woven fringe applied to its edges, instead of fringe made from the same material as the garment.

The woven fringe on the City of Harrisburg hunting shirt is made from linen. A New Hampshire man purportedly wore this particular hunting shirt in the winter at Valley Forge. Surviving with the shirt is a pair of trousers or pantaloons of a style that may date the shirt to the early nineteenth century and not from the Revolution. The existence of this garment begs the question of how frequently woven fringe was applied to Revolutionary era civilian or military hunting shirts.



Detail of woven fringe on the hunting shirt from the City of Harrisburg,
Pennsylvania
(Permission to use photograph courtesy of Mayor Stephan R. Reed, City of Harrisburg, at The
National Civil War Museum.)

In 1774, representatives of the American Colonies signed the third and final Non-Importation agreement no longer allowing the importation of British goods into the colonies. The following year domestic manufacture of textiles increased and giving rise to the hope that the new American army could be wholly clothed with American-made wools and linens. One tradesman, James Butland; a fringe and lace maker, advertised frequently in Philadelphia newspapers the trimmings he produced for the army. In February 1776 he advertised,

...may be had all kinds of uniforms for officers, in gold and silver, and all kinds of laces and trimmings for drummers, and soldiers hats and clothes, made to any pattern or colour, either for whole battalions or for a single suit...⁹

By 1777 James Butland broke with his business partner and moved his lace and fringe manufactory from Second Street in Philadelphia to Front Street. He also stated that he soon advertised his ability to manufacture,

... all kinds of uniforms for the army in gold, silver, silk or worsted; and whole battalions may be supplied with bindings and other uniforms, made to any pattern or colour, at short notice.¹⁰

Butland never specifically said that he made fringe for hunting shirts, however he was certainly capable of doing so, and he was already producing trims and bindings for the army. It is noteworthy that another merchant, John Ross from Philadelphia advertises in 1777 that he has a neat assorted of merchandise and specifically states he sells "fringe for hunting shirts."¹¹ Another later account of hunting shirts, a 1787 Pennsylvania Mercury records the General Orders for regiments on review in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The Commander in Chief, George Washington commented:

...nor can he forbear to return his particular thanks to such regiments, companies, and individuals, who have uniformed themselves with rifle frocks and overalls, trimmed with binding or fringe of the same color with the facings of the brigade.¹²

Perhaps the bindings produced by Butland during the war were yet another way to trim hunting shirts, or were referring to a woven fringe.

It does not appear that the use of woven fringes was widespread in the Continental Army, particularly in the early part of the war. Nearing the close of the

⁹ The Pennsylvania Gazette, February 6, 1776.

¹⁰ The Pennsylvania Gazette, August 27, 1777.

¹¹ The Pennsylvania Packet published as Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet or, the General Advertiser, June 28, 1777.

¹² New-Hampshire Gazette, published as New-Hampshire Gazette, and General Advertiser, November 21, 1787.

conflict, former Assistant Clothier General Samuel Caldwell recommended that the uniform for 1783 include a hunting shirt. With his recommendation Caldwell spelled out exactly what was needed for the garment, listing “2 yards of Russia sheeting, thread and fringe.”¹³ Including the thread and fringe as separate items probably meant that they were discrete material purchases.

Only 29 years after the War for Independence, the United States War Department began preparations for war with England again. The United States had established the Office of Public Purveyor in 1795.¹⁴ The purpose of this office was to acquire the needed materials, arms, clothing, and naval stores for the army and navy during times of peace and war. Throughout the early part of the nineteenth century many private contracts for fringe were made to supply the army.

During and prior to the War of 1812 woven fringe for hunting shirts seems to have been the standard. In 1810, Major Cuyler of New York gives a description of cheap uniforms for riflemen to consist of “Pantaloons, waistcoat and Rifle Frock of woolen cloth of black and white wool, of each in equal proportion, trimmed with blue worsted fringe.”¹⁵

The Office of the Public Purveyor drew up an abstract of the materials issued to tailors in the year 1812, including 91,000 yards of fringe used.¹⁶ At this point fringe was not only being used on hunting shirts or rifle frocks, but also on the trousers worn by soldiers.

A surviving tailor’s blotter from the United States Arsenal on the Schuylkill River lists materials withdrawn from the arsenal and what they were to be made into. Ezekiel Howell, a Philadelphia tailor, was charged in March and again in May of 1812 to make 900 rifle frocks. For the first 900 that he made in March, Howell withdrew 6,000 yards of yellow fringe and two months later withdrew another 2,400 yards of yellow fringe.¹⁷ Another tailor under contract through the arsenal, Jonathan Carson, withdrew 18,000 yards of yellow fringe for the making for 2,000 rifle frocks in 1812.¹⁸ After the War of 1812, the hunting shirt quickly saw its demise as a uniform of the American army.

The hunting shirt enjoys a legacy of being a highly distinctive American garment, which fell out of fashion almost as soon as it appeared. The distinctive

¹³ Marko Zlatich, *Washington’s Army 1779-1783: Volume 2* (London: Reed International Books Ltd, 1995), 10.

¹⁴ John F. Callen, *Military Laws of the United States* (Philadelphia: Printed by George W. Childs, 1863), 107.

¹⁵ *The American Mercury*, October 25, 1810.

¹⁶ Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Philadelphia Supply Agencies 1795-1858, Vouchers and Associated Papers and Receipts of Clothing establishment, “Abstract of materials issued to the under mentioned Tailors for the purpose of making Clothing for the US Army for the year 1812, Box 21, Entry 2118, Record Group 92, (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Building) 262.

¹⁷ Records of the Office of the Quarter Master General, Philadelphia Supply Agencies 1795-1858, Vol. 14, Entry 2117, Record Group 92, “Tailors Blotter 1810-1813,” (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Building). 91.

¹⁸ Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, Philadelphia Supply Agencies 1795-1858, Abstracts of Expenditures, Orders for Clothing and Supplies, Record Group 92, Entry 2118, Box 181, “Order May 7th 1812 Material Jonathan Carson for Rifle Frocks” (Washington, D.C.: National Archives Building).

feature of fringe certainly makes it stand out from any other garment being worn at the close of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

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