

The Good, Better, Best Mentality: A Suggested Way to View Clothing Choices for Reenacting North West Territory Alliance

By Linnea M. Bass and Kathleen Ward Rhoden, Department of the Inspector General

You don't have to be perfect to be a reenactor or living historian. In fact, being perfect is almost impossible. While there are those of us who strive to have the "best" research we can, the most authentic fabric we can find, the closest-to-correct garment construction we can recreate ... research is always changing, so there truly is no "perfect" impression.

Most of us were far from perfect when we began recreating the past. In fact, most of us started out in someone else's "not quite good enough" old clothing. So rather than taking a "this is right and this is wrong," approach when looking at clothing and accoutrements—either your own or somebody else's—consider the "good, better, and best" mentality.

- "Good" in this context is more like "good enough to get by." In other words, nobody is likely to point fingers at the garment and tell you never to appear in it again, but you know that there are things about it that are just ... not right.
- "Better" is a step up, but not really the best you can do. It looks good, but, realizing that the devil is in the details, you know you can do better next time. Doing better might be an improvement in the fit, the authenticity of the fabric, the construction techniques, or whatever.
- "Best" is current with today's research and has been consistently updated to be as close to an accurate recreation as possible.

Of course, there is the "Avoid-if-Possible" category. Most of us know what that is, even though it's hard to define. It's the bonnet that's the wrong shape and the gown made out of a really inauthentic quilting fabric, which together make you look like a fugitive from "Little House on the Prairie," rather than a refugee soldier's wife from Pennsylvania in 1777. The bottom line is that there are just some items that shouldn't be worn by 18th century reenactors unless there is no alternative.

Very few people are at the "best" in all their items of clothing and accoutrements. And only you can decide where to draw the line at how far you will go towards 100% authenticity (if there even is such a thing). But many of us find it helpful to look at each of our garments and decide which are the best that we can make them, and which we definitely want to improve the next time around.

No matter where you are in your journey of recreating the 18th century, you can evaluate a garment using the good, better, or best standards. Here are some questions to ask yourself. Have I updated the garment (or my knowledge about it) in the last 5 (or 10 or 15) years? Based on what I know and what I see other people wear, do I feel confident about it? Is it good enough not to get criticized, or is it really good ... or better ... or maybe best?

This is not a set of rigid rules. It's more just a mindset—a way to view your impression. Rather than leading to an "I'm better than you are" competition, think of it as a way of opening doors to conversations with other reenactors and living historians. Share what you know and learn from others in return.

Want to learn more about researching and making 18th century clothing? We've put together a series of documents we hope you'll find useful. These include:

- [*Researching and Wearing Your Revolutionary War Clothing with Confidence*](#) – A guide to researching 18th century clothing for those whose impressions are not provided by their unit.
- [*Hand Sewing Help: Stitches for 18th Century Reproduction Clothing*](#) – A collection of photos illustrating hand stitches found in 18th century extant garments, as well as links to tutorials demonstrating how to do them.
- [*Fabric Hints for 18th Century Clothing Reproduction*](#) – Tips for reenactors and living historians on fabric choices, including 18th century fabric terminology and how fabric and selvages were made during the American Revolution era.
- [*Documenting Your Clothing For Inspection*](#) – Additional information about the inspection process for NWTAs members.
- [*Basic IIF Example*](#) – A starting point for NWTAs members who are documenting their clothing for inspection.
- [*Recommended Books and Websites for Clothing Research: The Era of the American Revolution*](#) – A list of sources under various categories, including original 18th century garments, fabrics, descriptions of runaways, and online museum collections.