

Hand Sewing Help: Stitches for 18th Century Reproduction Clothing

North West Territory Alliance

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These are stitches commonly used in basic 18th century sewing. We have provided links to instructional videos on the Burnley and Trowbridge YouTube Channel, where available. For a complete list of the *Burnley and Trowbridge Historic Fashion Tutorial Series*, go to <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCySy8zO2XCnsSM1STJc0r6A/videos>

NOTE: The NWTAA does not require that garments be hand sewn. That said, you might want to consider using hand sewing for parts of the garments that are easily visible to the public.

A HUGE thank you to Andrea Studzinski for the photos of her stitching.

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Thread

We suggest that linen thread be used when sewing linen or wool fabric and silk thread be used when sewing silk. Cotton or linen thread may be used when sewing cotton.

Matching colored thread was not always used during the 18th century. Sometimes white or off-white thread was used for the seams of a garment of another color.

Linen thread is identified by the two numbers written either on the spool or the wrapper around the spool, such as 35/2. The first indicates its weight and the second indicates the number of strands twisted together (plied) to make the thread. Since the weight is determined by the number of yards per pound, a lower number indicates a thicker, heavier strand and a higher number indicates a finer and lighter strand. 35/2 is a medium weight suitable for sewing items like petticoats or breeches. 70/2 is a light weight suitable for sewing items made of fine handkerchief linen and other sheer or lightweight fabrics.

It's easier to work with linen thread if you wax it first and use a piece that's no more than 12"-18" long. Try to use a good sharp needle with the smallest eye that will admit the thread.

Running Stitch - for seams that don't need to be particularly strong, as well as for basting and gathering. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ms_JB4TeNYY



Back Stitch - for seams that will be under tension and need to be very strong. On the front side, it is similar to a modern machine sewing, but the back side will look rather messy. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBUvX3ISYgY&t=1s>



front side



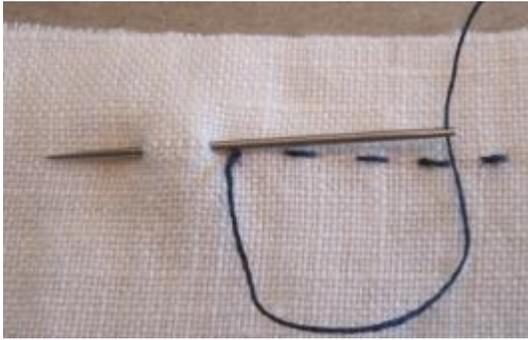
back side

Spaced Back Stitch - for seams that need to be moderately strong. In this version of the back stitch, the needle is inserted farther from the previous stitch, so an obvious space is left between them. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MxfsoFFe-E>



Combination Stitch (Running Back Stitch) - alternates between a running stitch and a back stitch, for seams that need to be moderately strong. It looks like a spaced back stitch, but is quicker to sew, especially if you do several running stitches between each back stitch.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBUvX3ISYgY&t=1s>



Hem Stitch - used for the hems at the bottoms of shifts, shirts, and petticoats. The edge of the fabric is folded over twice. Try to catch only one or two threads of the body of the piece, so the hem stitches show as little as possible on the front side.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr_axv22vjg&t=13s



Felled Seam (Flat Felled Seam or Half French Seam) - used to prevent raveling by enclosing the raw edge of a seam within a fold of fabric. The seam can be a running, back, or combination stitch. The folded seam allowance is held by a hem stitch.

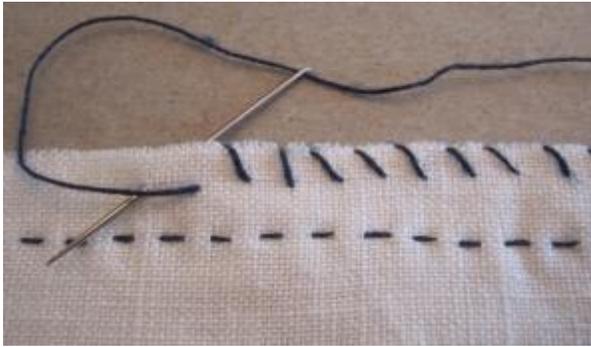


inside of garment with flat felled seam



right side of garment with flat felled seam

Overcast Stitch - used to prevent raveling on the seam allowance where it is not practical to use flat felling. For fabric that ravel very easily, place the stitches closer together.



Rolled Hem - a very narrow hem used on the edge of neck handkerchiefs, caps, and ruffles. This stitch finishes the edge and rolls the raw edge of the fabric under, all in one step.



Selvage Join (Butt Stitch) - used to join two selvage edges together without wasting fabric. There are several variations of this stitch. The easiest is to match up the edges and whip stitch over them. NOTE: Many selvages today are too modern-looking for this technique to be used.



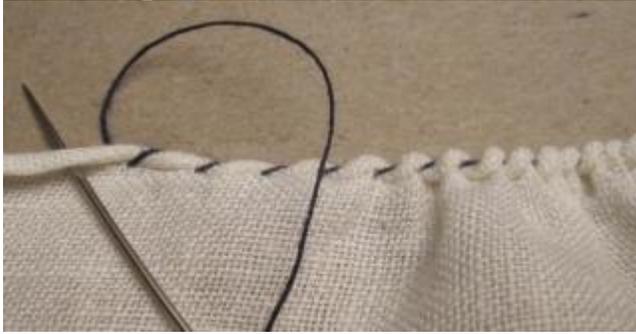
selvage join during sewing



finished (opened) selvage join

For more information on selvages, see our [**Fabric Hints For 18th Century Reproduction Clothing.**](#)

Whipped Gathers - used to gather the backs and ruffles of caps. The edge is rolled under and enclosed in a whip stitch. When the thread is pulled, the stitches pull closer together creating nice, even gathers.



The stitches on the right have been pulled up and gathered. The stitches on the left have not.

Attaching a Whip Gathered Piece - used to attached the backs and ruffles of caps to the head band. The piece to which is it attached is finished with a small folded hem. The attaching stitches are placed over those that were used to create the gathers on the ruffle.



The ruffle has a rolled hem at the top edge and whipped gathers at the bottom edge. The body of the piece is finished with a hem stitch. The stitches to attach the whip gathered ruffle are placed directly over the gathering stitches and catch the edge of the body.

Completed Whipped Gathers



Right side of a whip gathered piece

Stroked Gathers - produces the deep and even gathers. It was frequently used when attaching cuffs to shirts and shifts. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zWnZFta5U&t=13s



preliminary stitching for stroked gathers

Attaching Stroked Gathers to a Cuff - with each stitch, catch a couple of threads on the peak of each gather and then the edge of the cuff.

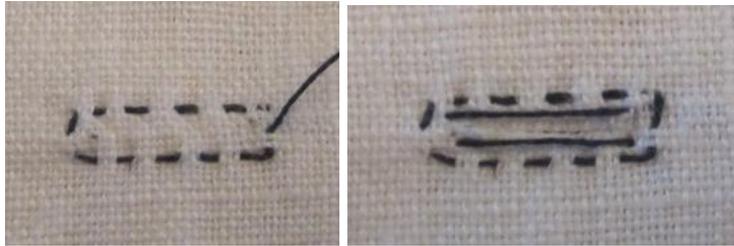


Buttonhole Stitch - creates a row of half knots along the edge of the buttonhole. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLKRwQYfi&t=52s>



Hand Stitched Buttonhole - for the cuffs of shirts and shifts. Although there are other methods for finishing the front end of a buttonhole, a bar tack was commonly used during the Revolutionary War Era.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLKoKRwQYfi&t=52s>



FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON HAND STITCHING

Dillmont, Therese de. *Encyclopedia of Needlework*. 1844.

Although published well after the 18th century, this book has valuable information on hand sewing. An online version is available at <http://encyclopediaofneedlework.com>

It can be downloaded at <https://archive.org/details/encyclopediaofne00dill>

Kannik, Kathleen.

The Lady's Guide to Plain Sewing, by A Lady, Book I. ISBN 0-9640161-0-9.

The Lady's Guide to Plain Sewing, Book II, by A Lady ISBN 0-9640161-2-5.

The Workwoman's Guide, by a Lady. ISBN 0-940983001