

Fabric Hints for 18th Century Reproduction Clothing

North West Territory Alliance

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The following information is intended give you an idea about what fabrics were used (and how they were referred to) during the American Revolution Era. It is not intended to serve as documentation and the information here is far from complete. Fabrics and textiles of the 18th century are a vast topic that researchers and historians are still discovering today. That said, we hope the information here will help you with your fabric choices as you acquire and/or construct your reproductions of 18th century clothing.

Fabric Choices

Fabrics made of natural fibers should be used for all garments. This is a matter of both authenticity and safety. Synthetic fabrics rarely, if ever, look the same as their natural fabric counterparts. In addition, nylon and other synthetics are more dangerous if they catch fire while you are wearing them. Rather than flaming up and turning to ash like natural fibers, they melt and embed themselves in the skin, causing much deeper and more serious burns.

- **Wool:** Up to 25% nylon is accepted by the NWTa. Terms used for types of wool during the period vary extensively. Heavy wools include broadcloth, bearskin, calimanco, cloth, coating, duffel, fearnought, and frize. Other wools include baize (bays), druggat, durant, everlasting, flannel, halfthicks, kersey, plaid (plad), rug, serge (sometimes combined with silk), shag, shalloon, strouding, stuff (stuft), bristol stuff, woolen, and worsted.
- **Linen:** During the 18th century, linen was used extensively, particularly for garments that touched the body, including shirts, shifts, and women's caps. It was strong and stood up well to laundering techniques, such as boiling. Other terms used for types of linen during the period include brown linen, cambric, dowlas, holland, kenting (kenton), lawn, mecklenburg, moreen, oznabrig (ozenbrigs, osnabrug), rolls, russia, thread, ticken, and tow (towcloth).
- **Cotton:** Cotton took dye better than linen, and could be woven into a smooth fabric that produced superior results when used with 18th century printing techniques. It was not as strong as linen, and tended to be more expensive than linen. Other terms used for types of cotton during the period include calico (calicoe), humhum, muslin, and nankeen.
- **Linen / Cotton Mixes:** Throughout the century it became more common for linen, the stronger fiber, to be used for much of the warp (vertical threads on the loom) and for cotton, which took the dye better, to be used in the weft (horizontal threads on the loom). This was particularly true for checked fabrics. Fustian is an 18th century fabric closely related, as it is a mix of cotton and flax.
- **Linsey-Woolsey:** Many petticoats and other garments worn by middle and lower class women were made of linsey-woolsey (also called linsey or lincey). This was an inexpensive coarse fabric, woven using a linen warp and woolen weft. The linen was generally unbleached or white and the wool was dyed red, blue, green, black, etc., which gave the fabric a unique "tweedy" look. Linsey-woolsey could also be striped. Unfortunately, linsey-woolsey fabric is not available to us commercially, so we use linen or wool as substitutes.
- **Silk:** Silk could be dyed almost any color, and could be made with complicated patterns woven into the fabric. Silk was generally expensive, and there are multiple examples of silk gowns that were remodeled multiple times as styles changed throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries, in order to keep the valuable fabric in use. Other terms used for types of silk

during the period include bombazeen, damask (damascus), lutestring (lustring), mode, paduasoy, peeling (peeling), persian, sarsnet, satin, and taffety.

- **Other Fabric Blends:** Like today, many blends existed during the period. These blends were a combination of wool, linen, cotton, or silk. Terms for these vary, and include camblet or camblettee (a wool and silk or linen combination), poplin (a wool and silk combination), serge (either wool or a wool and silk blend) and tammy (a wool and cotton combination).

Warp vs Weft

Just in case you see references to these terms, here is what they mean:

Warp threads are the longitudinal (vertical) threads that are attached to the loom going lengthwise.

Weft threads are the lateral (horizontal) threads, and are woven under and over the warp threads at right angles using a shuttle going back and forth from one side of the loom to the other.

Fabric Weight

Fabric, especially linen, is often identified by the weight of one square yard. A 3.5 ounce linen is a lightweight fabric often called “handkerchief linen.” It is suitable for kerchiefs, caps, or lightweight shifts and shirts. A 5.5 ounce linen is considered midweight, and is suitable for petticoats, gowns, bedgowns, and heavier shifts and shirts.

Fabric Width

Fabric widths were narrower during the 18th century than they are today. Before the industrial revolution, looms were restricted by the reach of the weaver’s arms. Most fabrics were 24-36 inches wide.

The narrow width had implications for garment construction. Separate pieces of fabric had to be sewn together to make a garment wider if the cloth was not wide enough. An example of this is the gores at the bottom of shifts.

Stripes

It was more common for stripes to be woven into the cloth rather than printed. They could run lengthwise or horizontally (but not diagonally) across the fabric. It was most common for the stripes to run lengthwise.

Patterned Weaves

By altering the arrangement of warp and weft threads on a loom, weaving can produce repetitious patterns in fabric, such as plain, twill, herringbone, or satin. The complexity of a pattern depends on the number of harnesses used to raise and lower the warp threads, the arrangement of warp threads on each harness, and the method by which the weft is transferred across the loom. Plain weave fabric, which includes checks and most striped fabrics, require only a two-harness loom. Twills and herringbone require at least a four-harness loom. Not all weave patterns were available in 18th century America. We recommend that you research patterned fabric before purchasing.

Printed Fabric

The terms calico and chintz were often used to describe printed cotton fabrics. Prints should be as close as possible to reproductions of originals used for garments between 1775 and 1783. Prints from earlier in the 1700s (say, 1750 or so) can also be used, since garments made of expensive fabric were remodeled as styles changed. Be sure to document the design, colors, and

size of the print, as well as the way it was used. [Just because you have a documented 18th century printed fabric doesn't mean you should use it to make a cap or a shift.]

Quilted Fabric

Quilted fabrics were popular, especially for petticoats. 18th century ads for runaway servants include a fair number of quilted petticoats, often wool, many of them black. Upper class quilted petticoats were frequently silk. In either case, the outer fabric was sewn to an inner fabric, with batting in between the two layers. The stitching used in this process often produced intricate designs.

There was also fabric that appeared to be quilted, but was actually woven on the loom to give that appearance. Called *marcella* or *marseilles*, it is sometimes available today. We strongly suggest, however, that you do some research before purchasing to make sure you are getting the correct fabric.

Selvages

The selvage (sometimes spelled selvedge) is the woven "border" at the edge of the fabric. Modern factory production creates a selvage that appears different in color, weave, or texture than the rest of the cloth. This was not true in 18th century industrial cloth production.

That means that just about all modern fabrics have selvages that do not look like those of the 18th century, but some are better than others. Those with a fuzzy, fringed edge composed of the ends of threads are particularly inauthentic in appearance. If it is likely to be seen by the public, consider hiding an obviously inauthentic selvage within a flat felled seam.



“Bad” selvage: The color differs from the rest of the fabric and the ends of the weft threads form a fringe on the edge. Neither of these things would be characteristics of an 18th century fabric.



Acceptable selvage: There is little difference in color or texture from the rest of the fabric.



Better selvage: It is very narrow and almost indistinguishable from the rest of the fabric.



“Iffy” selvage: Since the vertical stripe does not extend into the selvage, it looks different than the rest of the fabric, but at least there is no fringe formed by the ends of the weft threads.



Better selvage: The checked pattern extends all the way to the edge of the fabric, although there is a difference in the texture of the weave.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

See our [*Recommended Books and Websites for Clothing Research: The Era of the American Revolution*](#) for books and websites that will provide more detailed information on fabrics.

See our [*Hand Sewing Help: Stitches for 18th Century Reproduction Clothing*](#) for information on stitches commonly used in 18th century sewing.