

Researching and Wearing Your Revolutionary War Clothing with Confidence

North West Territory Alliance

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This document is intended to help living historians and reenactors who are new to the process of researching and making historic clothing. Although the principles are basically the same for all eras in history, our main concentration is on the period of the American Revolution. We don't claim to have all the answers, but hope to provide some guidance for those who want to verify that the garments they wear are correct for the time period they are recreating.

Researching 18th century clothing doesn't have to be difficult or tedious, even if you don't really like doing research. The key is to find a couple of sources that support what it is you want to wear. That will help you feel comfortable in your clothes, and allow you to feel confident that your clothing is authentic.

Why do this research at all? As reenactors and living historians, we are painting a picture for those we are educating, including ourselves. The clothing and accoutrements we wear are a vital part of the portrait of any time period. Experience has taught us that well intentioned people sometimes give advice on clothing that is not consistent with the current state of research. Since new information comes to light frequently, it's difficult for anybody to be an expert in all subjects. So while you can certainly listen to advice, or use a modern pattern or blog, the only way to be absolutely sure the information is correct is to verify it yourself using a primary source! In other words, researching each garment before you make or purchase it should help make you feel confident in what you are wearing.

What is a primary source? The simple answer is something from the period. A primary source is any of the following from the Revolutionary War period (1775-1783): an original garment, a written source, or a painting.

We have broken down research into the following steps:

[Step 1: Understand the difference between a primary source and a secondary source](#)

[Step 2: Choose a persona \(so you know what clothing to look for\)](#)

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Step 1: Understand the difference between a primary source and a secondary source

Ideally, you want to base your clothing on something that you can prove existed during the time period you are portraying. It might be an original (or “extant”) garment, an original pattern for making a garment, a period drawing that illustrates a garment, or a period written description of a fabric or garment. These are all excellent examples of primary sources. For more help on what constitutes a primary resource, visit Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL):

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/8/>

Of course, you may use modern books/articles/blogs with instructions on how to make garments. But know that these are secondary sources. They are useful, but are not proof that the items existed during the time period, unless they *contain* primary sources. Secondary sources are less reliable than primary sources because they reflect the opinions and interpretations of the author (who was not around during the American Revolution). Caution must also be used when relying on descriptions written several years after the fact, even by eyewitnesses. When using a secondary source, you are trusting someone else’s research and taking their word for it. So use secondary sources *in conjunction* with the primary sources you find.

Some modern patterns and books about 18th century clothing do this already. They provide their thoughts and conclusions on their research, and provide the primary sources they have found. You can use these confidently, but make sure to keep the full information so you know that you are referencing a primary source, rather than just a modern author’s opinion.

Keep in mind, if someone somehow makes you feel unsure about your clothing choices, showing them a secondary source may not convince them, especially if they have previous experience with poor secondary interpretations. Primary sources are the best way to prove you are right.

If your modern pattern or sewing instructions found in books/articles/blogs does not include a primary source, you can still use them. Just back them up with primary sources.

Here’s an example: The Brigade of the American Revolution (BAR) published a book titled, *Women’s Dress During the American Revolution: An Interpretive Guide*, last revised in 2004. The BAR provides instructions on how to make many women’s garments, and while the book has not been revised for a while, it can be used as a secondary source for instructions. You may choose to make an apron using the BAR’s instructions (pages 45-48), but you will also need to find primary sources to go along with it.

Note: You may be surprised how many modern patterns for 18th century garments exist that are very difficult to verify by finding an extant garment in a museum that is cut and constructed in the same way. Some are based on the look of a garment in a period illustration, but aren’t constructed like any known garment. Others are based on older research and haven’t been updated. Still, there are some that are very good, and will result in a faithful reproduction of an original 18th century garment. [Note: We are not going to endorse any particular brand of patterns, but may be able to give an opinion about the authenticity of patterns with which we are familiar.]

Our suggestion is that you carefully check the documentation provided with a pattern and verify that the cut of the garment (shape of the pattern pieces) is consistent with an extant garment from the right time period.

Working with both primary sources *and* instructions from a secondary source simultaneously should give you confidence in the garment you are making.

Step 2: Choose a persona

In order to provide a framework for making decisions about what clothing to wear, create an 18th century persona. Some of this will become clear as you begin to look at primary sources, especially paintings. But a good place to start is with your reenacting/ living history group. They should be able to provide you with vital information, including the dates your group portrays and its location. From there, develop a brief biography, including the place your persona lives, socio economic status, ethnicity, reason for being in or following the army (if applicable), etc.

Then, consider your appearance. Garments you choose to wear should be consistent with the persona you choose in terms of construction, style, and fabric choice. Ideally, your clothing should match the time period of the regiment or group with which you are associated.

But time period isn't everything—also consider availability and suitability. Try to find indications that a person like the one you portray could have had access to garments you intend to make/acquire.

- Consider country and ethnicity. If your portrayal is American or English, avoid using primary sources from other countries as documentation.
- Consider location. If your persona lived on the frontier, find out what sorts of goods were available in that area. The fact that a garment existed in Siberia in 1776, doesn't mean it could have worn by the person you are portraying.
- Consider socio-economic status. The lower and middle classes tended to imitate their betters. So styles might have been very similar, although choices of fabric would have been more limited. Higher fashion garments might be worn out because they were purchased in the used clothing market.
- Consider proper fit. Part of style is the fit of the garment. People trying to fit in would probably wear garments that fit reasonably well, even if they were second-hand, worn, or patched.
- Consider the situation. Are you a refugee who barely escaped the war zone with what you could carry, or are you the wife of an officer visiting for the day from you nearby home?

Remember, it's much easier to look at descriptions and drawings of a typical person in your location, situation, social class, etc. and try to look similar, rather than deciding what you want to look like and then looking for documentation to prove it.

Step 3: Find primary sources to use for your clothing

Now that you know what type of research to look for (primary sources) and what type of person you want to be (your persona), here's how you go about researching each article of clothing before you make/acquire it:

- Choose a construction source (find a primary source for the cut and configuration of the garment you want)
- Choose a fabric source (find a primary source for the fabric type that you want to use, i.e. linen, wool, etc., or better yet, find what type of fabric was most likely used for that type of garment)
- Choose a fabric color and fabric design source (match your fabric color and fabric design, i.e. plain, stripes, checks, or prints, to something from the period)

You can get as detailed as you want when it comes to finding these sources. Of course, you need at least one source for each garment. One source works if it includes the construction, fabric type, and fabric color/design. You'll need more sources to document those aspects of a garment separately. You can also add sources for details such as buttons, taping, or decorations.

The more support you find for the garment (or other item) that you're recreating, the better. Most of us should be wearing items that were fairly common in the period. If you see a garment in a painting, you can look for a description of that same garment in writing or an original garment with similar construction to prove it wasn't just an artist's whim or an one-off oddity. The more sources you have, the more confident you will feel that you are right in wearing that garment.

Fabric color and design choices are a little complicated to explain quickly. Garments in the 18th century usually had a common fabric type associated with them. For instance, both solid white aprons and blue checked aprons were very common. Caps, on the other hand, were usually solid white, but we don't see any checked caps. So first you need to determine what types of fabrics were commonly used for the garment you want to acquire.

Let's say you have determined that flowered prints were often used to make gowns. Your next step is to find fabric that is either a reproduction of an 18th century flowered print from before 1784, or something that closely resembles an extant print. You don't need to find a print that is a match for an extant gown. So you may need three primary sources for the gown: one for the construction of the garment, one for the fact that gowns were made of flowered prints in the type of fabric you want to use (cotton, linen, etc.), and one for the design of the print that you intend to use to make the gown.

Where do you find primary sources? Here's where:

1. Use online museum collections to find original garments.

Colonial Williamsburg's Online Collection at <http://emuseum.history.org>, Museum of Fine Arts Boston at www.mfa.org, Manchester Art Gallery at <http://manchesterartgallery.org/collections>, and Victoria and Albert Museum London at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk> are a couple good places to start. Search for the garment you wish to make, and you'll have plenty of primary sources at your fingertips.

2. Use Pinterest, as long as you're cautious.

Pinterest, at <https://www.pinterest.com>, can be your best friend for 18th century clothing research. You can save your research easily on Pinterest Boards, share pins with other reenactors, and "Follow" other 18th century boards on the site. Enter a phrase into the search, such as "18th Century Gown," or something more specific, such as "18th Century Pink Open Robe Gown." Just make sure to go back and check the original source from which the image was pinned to get full information on the location of the original item or painting, such as dates, accession numbers, etc. Do this by clicking on the pin. If it takes you to a museum collection or a verified antiques auction site (the latter being a little more difficult to determine), you're golden! Make sure to save the relevant information, especially the url and accession number. If the pin takes you to a blog, it's up to you whether you want to spend the time to get the full information on the location of the original item or painting, which the blog, in many cases, will not help you to do (for example, they may give you the museum, but not the accession number...or worse, the *wrong* accession number).

3. Use runaway ads as a source for both clothing choices and persona development.

Newspapers during the American Revolution time period include runaway ads for wives, servants, and slaves. These describe, with some detail, what middle and lower class women were wearing and are a great primary source. You could even, potentially, pick a runaway and make your impression to be exactly like her (or him). Terminology can be difficult to decipher sometimes (for example, "ditto" and "do." are both often used to say "the same as the one before.") There are books available that specifically collect these ads for this purpose, including Don Hagist's *Wives, Slaves, and Servant Girls*.

4. Check out court testimony for descriptions of people, clothing, and other items.

You can search by year to find descriptions of trials in England during the Revolutionary War years in *Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913*, <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/index.jsp>.

5. Consult our bibliography.

[*Recommended Books and Websites for Clothing Research: The Era of the American Revolution.*](#)

Step 4: Learn how to combine sources to get more detailed

As mentioned above, the more sources you find for a garment, the better. This is especially helpful when one source is unclear or overly complicated, but another source is simple or painted in great detail. These sources can be used in combination to justify different details of your garment. For instance, in addition to your main primary source for your gown, you can use the construction of a different extant gown's sleeves, the construction of another extant gown's stomacher, and the ribbons from another extant gown's bodice.

You should not use this method when researching different *types* of garments. If you find a form of pleating on a gown that you really like, you shouldn't use it on your bedgown unless you can find documentation that someone actually did it that way in the 18th century, prior to 1784.

Combining sources is also helpful when a primary written or painted source provides information but there are few or no extant examples that survived. An example of this would be high heeled women's shoes made of leather. There are far more extant ladies' shoes from the 18th century made of some sort of fabric, such as wool or satin, but there are many, many primary written sources describing women's leather high heeled shoes. Using a primary extant source for your shoe construction in combination with a primary written source for your shoe's fabric and color will work as justifiable documentation.

Here's an example of this kind of combining:

- For the style, use the black satin shoe from the Manchester Art Gallery. Accession Number: 1947.917. Retrieved October 16, 2016.
<http://manchesterartgallery.org/collections/search/collection/?id=1947.917>.
- For the fact that ladies' shoes are made of leather, use this runaway servant description "[75] Ran away... a mulatto woman... Had on, when she went away... much worn high heeled leather shoes, with white metal buckles" originally from the *Maryland Gazette*, May 13, 1773 as reprinted in Don N. Hagist's *Wives, Slaves, and Servant Girls* (Yardley, PA. Westholme Publishing, 2016), pg. 36-37.

Step 5: Consider some common missteps in researching 18th century clothing

Research is always changing, and even though the past doesn't change, our understanding of it does. Consider if, in 200 years, someone wanted to re-live the 21st century and found an extant pair of red jeans, circa 2002. Then, they shared that primary source with all of their reenacting friends and at the next 21st century reenactment, there was a *flood* of red jeans, with only a few blue jeans among them... We can never be quite sure what happened over 200 years ago, but here are some common missteps and warnings we'd like to highlight for your consideration:

1. The state of knowledge and research changes over time.

The fact that an item was acceptable in the reenacting and living history community 15 years ago, does not mean it is considered correct today. Similarly, sources that were once commonly used are no longer considered good research. Among other things, avoid *Distaff Sketchbook* and *Sketchbook '76*.

2. "Suzie Q told me this was documentable."

Suzie is not an 18th century primary source! You can be guided by her opinion, but you need to verify whatever she tells you.

3. Consider ethnic clothing with caution!

Just like today, people wanted to fit in. Scholars believe that by the 1770s, most Americans "looked English." That said, there were exceptions. We believe that some smaller communities of people who originated from the same country retained some of their ethnic dress. Other obvious exceptions might be older people, those recently arrived from a foreign country, or Native Americans.

4. Be careful when using artwork to document a garment.

There was a difference between real and fantasy dress in the 18th century (think cosplay, like Marie Antoinette dressing as a shepherdess). This is reflected in paintings: some are realistic, but some show idealized pastoral scenes or people wearing fantasy clothing. The people in the drawing should look like someone you might see on the street. Also, avoid modern re-drawings of original works of art, since they often contain errors of interpretation.

5. Consider the original purpose of the garment.

The dreaded “sleeveless bodice” (v-necked and laced up the front) is a misunderstood and misinterpreted garment. There *are* extant 18th century women’s garments without sleeves, but almost all are quilted. Experts believe they were worn under other garments for warmth. Thus, wearing a non-quilted version as an outer garment is not appropriate.

6. Beware of using the argument that something is "logical."

Although something seems obvious to us, it may have been foreign to the 18th century mind.

7. Consider style changes over the course of the 18th century.

There was a *big* change in style for both men and women between 1785 and 1800. We can’t emphasize this enough. The fact that a garment or textile can be dated to 1792, or even 1785, does not mean it is appropriate for the Revolutionary War, which ended in 1783.

Sometimes, however, it’s just not possible to find an extant garment that’s date exactly matches the time you are portraying. So the question arises, how far away from your recreated date can you go to find a reliable source?

Unfortunately, the answer depends on the garment type and isn’t set in stone.

When dealing with extant garments in museums, the dating of their items is often open to a certain amount of interpretation. As a result, museum curators sometimes assign a fairly wide range of dates to an item, such as “last half of the 18th century” or “1760-1810.” So you will sometimes need to compare extant garments to other sources, such as artworks or written descriptions, to get a feel for where they fall within the date range.

Going back earlier in time is less of a problem than going forward after 1783. But it’s difficult for us to know how long some people might have continued to wear old-fashioned styles. Styles for high fashion garments, such as gowns, changed more quickly than for more casual items such as bedgowns. You’ll find 1759 artwork by Paul Sandy showing working women wearing bedgowns that look very much like the M. Garsault’s well known bedgown pattern from 1769. So it seems pretty safe for a woman portraying a 1777 soldier’s wife to wear one.

When it comes to high fashion fabric, such as silks or printed cottons, we don’t advise going past 1783. However, it’s safer than you might think to go back in time to document such fabrics. We know that gowns made of expensive fabrics were sometimes remodeled more than once over time to keep up with changes in style, while still showing off the valuable fabric. So it might be okay to use a pricey fabric that dates from as early as 1750 to recreate a 1770s gown.

The best thing you can do when using primary sources from dates outside of the years you are portraying, or with unclear or wide-ranging dates, is to try and find multiple sources to give your garments validity. Combine your sources as described in Step 4 above to feel confident that you have a well-researched item.

Step 6: Keep track of your research, i.e. documentation

The sources that you gather for each garment are considered your documentation, i.e. your proof that an item existed during the American Revolution. Once you've found them, make sure you don't lose track of them! We can't stress this enough. You'd be surprised at how many times you hear experienced living historians saying, "I *know* I saw documentation for that, but I can't find it."

Ideally, you should look for documentation for each item before you make or purchase it. Whenever you find good documentation for something, try to file it away in a place you'll be able to find it when you need it. You can keep the documentation in digital files on your computer or in paper files in a notebook or folder. Format doesn't matter. Just be sure to get all the information and save it in an organized fashion. Since you may need to revisit a source, the most important thing is to make sure you record *all* the information you need to be able to go back and find the original book or internet site again later.

Take special care when recording the information about a primary source within a secondary source, so you have all the information you need about both the 18th century original and the modern source.

There are standard formats for creating a list of the sources of information that you have found. These are used in the academic world to provide guidance on how to create bibliographies and footnotes for term papers. There are several accepted styles for these (APA, MLA, Chicago). We suggest that you consult one of them, not because the exact format matters, but because it will guide you toward recording all the necessary information in an organized fashion.

For help recording information in one of these styles, visit BibMe at <http://www.bibme.org>, or Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) at <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/>.

Citing Items in Museum Collections

For an item in a museum, include the name and location of the museum, the accession number, description of the item, original date of creation of the item, and the URL for the website where the photo of the item is available. If the item is not on the website, but something you saw in person, get all the information from the sign accompanying it (especially any numbers, which are probably the accession number which specifically identifies that item). You should also record the retrieval date, meaning the day you last saw it online or in person. Sometimes your sources will be removed from the website collection or museum archives, and your retrieval date proves when you found it so that you don't lose that source, even after it's no longer available at the museum. (For the same reasons, you should record the date that you found something anywhere on the internet.)

Note to NWTA Members

The North West Territory Alliance (NWTA), has created a standardized form to help members organize the documentation they have found for their clothing and accoutrements. This is the [*Individual Inspection Form \(IIF\)*](#). The Inspector General's Department will use these forms when a unit is up for inspection, which occurs every 5 year.

For further information on the NWTA inspection process, and on how to fill out an IIF, see our [*Basic IIF Example*](#) and also [*Documenting Your Clothing for Inspection*](#).

Step 7: Feel confident in your clothes

If you put the effort into finding primary sources for your garments before you make or buy them, you're likely to feel far more comfortable in your clothing at reenacting and living history events. When spectators ask you about what you're wearing, you'll probably have a good answer for them. And if someone challenges you about a garment you're wearing, you can say, "Oh yeah, I have documentation." There's a confidence you get from that that's leagues ahead of wearing something just because someone said to.

Further information to help you on your way:

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

For information on sewing, see our [*Hand Sewing Help: Stitches for 18th Century Reproduction Clothing*](#).

For ideas on how to think about authenticity issues, see our [*The Good, Better, Best Mentality: A Suggested Way to View Clothing Choices for Reenacting*](#).