

The Massachusetts Bounty Coat of 1775

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One of the distinguishing features of a military establishment is uniform clothing that sets the soldier apart as a member of a unique society. When that society is an army of citizen soldiers fighting a standing army of professional soldiers over matters of principle, the uniform they wear can also take on a political significance.

Four days after the "Concord Fight" in 1775, there was a hastily called session of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. After establishing procedures for collecting depositions from the participants, the Congress turned to the ad hoc army besieging the King's Regulars in Boston. Camps extending in a broad arc from Medford on the north to Dorchester on the south needed supplies of food, fuel, tools, clothing, and shelter. To meet these needs, the Provincial Congress resolved to raise a "Massachusetts Grand Army" of 13,600 men, and appointed a Committee of Supplies to collect and distribute the necessary commodities.¹

One of the incentives offered for the members of this new establishment was the provision of a coat to each man as his enlistment bounty.² In doing so, the Provincial Congress was merely following an historical precedent established over the preceding century of furnishing a military coat as a bounty to provincial soldiers enlisting for a military expedition.³

Despite the early resolution on the part of the Congress, it would be over two months before further action would be taken to put the bounty coats into production. On June 29th, nearly two weeks after the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Provincial Congress finally set plans in motion for the provision of bounty coats. It would appear that on this date, it was decided to provide 13,000 coats; a portion of the total was to be provided by each town based on its population. A committee was appointed to work out the details.⁴ This committee reported back on July 5th, with the following resolution:

Resolved, that 13,000 Coats be provided as soon

as may be, and one thereof given to each non-commissioned Officer & Soldier in the Massachusetts Forces agreeable to the Resolves of Congress on the 23rd day of April last, and in order to facilitate their being procured,

Resolved, that the said 13,000 coats be proportioned immediately on all the towns & Districts in this Colony except the Town of Boston and Charlestown, as they have paid in the last Provincial Tax, which Towns & Districts are desired to cause them to be made of good plain cloth - preference to be given to the Manufactures of this Country and to be delivered to the Committee of Supplies without Buttons, at or before the first Day of Octo' next and sooner if possible. That for every yard of such Cloth of seven-eighths of a yard width they shall be allowed and paid the sum of 5/4 and in that proportion for Cloth of a greater or less width and the sum of 4/ for making each and every Coat, and the Select men of each Town & District respectively are directed to lay their Accounts before the Committee of Supplies, who are ordered to draw on the Receiver General for the payment thereof.

Resolved, that each Coat be faced with the same kind of cloth of which it is made, that the Coats be made in the plain common way without lappels, short, and with small folds, and that the Select men cause a Certificate to be sewed to the inside of each Coat, Perporting from what Town it came and by whom the Coat was made, and if the Cloth was manufactured in this Country, by whom it was manufactured...

Resolved, that the Committee of Supplies be and they are hereby directed to provide all the Coats proportioned on such Towns and Districts as give information to them as aforesaid that they cannot supply them, and they are to cause all the Coats to be Buttoned with Pewter Buttons, and that the Coats for each Regiment respectively have Buttons of the same number stamped on the face of them.⁵

The resolution also directed the Committee of Supplies to send a circular letter to the selectmen of each town in Massachusetts and the Maine District, describing the coats and the quantity required, and "inclose to them a sample of the goodness of the Cloth of which the Coats are to be made..."⁶ The letter to the selectmen of Stoughtonham, Mass. is shown in Figure 1. Nota-

Watertown, July 6th 1775.

GENTLEMEN,

IN Obedience to the Order of Congress we have proportioned Thirteen Thousand Coats on all the Towns and Districts in this Colony, excepting Boston and Charlestown; and have inclosed you the Proportion, with their Resolves, and a Sample as a Direction to you both as to the Colour and Quality of the Cloth which shall be Manufactured by you, and of the Quality of the imported Cloths of which the Coats shall be made: We are to assure you that the Coats you supply shall be delivered to the Men of your Town so far as Circumstances will admit.

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OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON

We are, Gentlemen, respectfully,

your most humble Servants,

DAVID CHEEVER, Chairman.

P. S. A large Number of Shirts, Stockings and Summer Breeches are wanted immediately for the Use of the Army, you are therefore earnestly requested, as you value the Lives and Health of your Countrymen, to furnish this Committee as soon as possible, with a large Number of the said Articles, not less than two Shirts, two pair of Stockings and two pair of Summer Breeches to each Coat, apportioned as the Share of your Town----and send them as soon as procured to Mr. William Hunt, at Watertown---We shall be ready to Order Payment for the same as soon as receiv'd, according to the Prices which you shall certify, relying on your judgment to prevent Impositions upon the Soldiers.

Figure 1: Circular Letter to Selectmen of Stoughtonham, July 6, 1775. (Photo courtesy of Rare Books & Manuscripts Division, Boston Public Library)

ble is the fact that the attached sample of wool is described in the accompanying letter as a guide to both the quality and color of the cloth, whether of local manufacture or imported.⁷ The sample is heavily milled, with a covering nap that obscures the weave, and a smooth firm finish, suggesting a weight of 20 ounces or more. The color is between Fawn (Pantone #16-1510) and Tobacco Brown (Pantone #17-1327).

The cost of cloth and making compares favorably with similar coats produced in and around Boston just prior to the war. Between 1767 and 1775, the average price among Boston tailors for making short coats and jackets was around 6 shillings.⁸ The total cost ranged around 25/, the same cost later allowed by the Provincial Congress for the bounty coats.

The coat described in the Provincial Congress' resolution suggests the appearance of a common workman's coat or jacket, with uniform color and numbered buttons as the only military distinctions. There is an original jacket, shown in Figure 2, in the collections of the Connecticut Historical Society. It is made of "walnut dyed homespun linen," and is supposed to have been worn by a shoe maker in Guilford, Connecticut ca.1780.⁹ Like the proposed bounty coats, this thigh length jacket is a tobacco brown color. This color seems to have been a popular and perhaps economical color for woollen and linen clothing in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century New England. Although simply made, the coat is carefully constructed, with all seam edges overcast in linen thread. The nine pewter buttons are fixed into the body of the jacket with selvedge strips of the garment linen run through the shanks then sewn down. Because of economy or the size of the coat, there were only five buttonholes, used for closure of the front of the garment. Coats or jackets like these were a standard part of the wardrobe of farmers, artisans, and laborers.

Working class dress can be found in the growing propaganda war between London and the Colonies. In a 1770 political cartoon entitled "Political Electricity", various tradesmen of Boston perform their tasks under the guns of the Royal Navy. All are wearing short coats or sleeved waistcoats (Fig. 3). Ropeworkers and wharfingers were among the mob fired on by

soldiers of the 29th Regiment in the Boston Massacre. As we can see in Figure 4, Paul Revere used workman's jackets to help distinguish between the soldiers and the victims in his depiction of the "Bloody Massacre". At least two of the civilians in the foreground are shown wearing thigh length jackets with plain cuffs and collars.

As we can see, the designation of a "common plain" coat for use by the Massachusetts forces was probably no accident. It was a vehicle for expressing a political identity. During previous colonial wars, Massachusetts often provided its soldiers with military coats styled on the British Army model. During the French and Indian War, while fighting alongside the Regulars, provincial soldiers received or were sold blue coats faced red in the lapels and cuffs.¹⁰ These had the effect of providing a specific association with the British military establishment. The Massachusetts Grand Army, by comparison, was a force engaged in fighting against the King's troops and all that they represented. From a political standpoint, it was only appropriate that they support that image by uniforming themselves in a garment that was at once cheap and easy to produce, and whose appearance suggested the epitome of the citizen soldier. By encouraging the use of domestically produced woolens, the coats became a defiant symbol of America's self-sufficiency in the face of England's colonial policies. Numbered military buttons allowed for distinction between the regiments. Lastly, as a bounty garment, it was an extremely practical garment, as it could serve the wearer as a common coat once his military obligation was discharged.

By mid August 1775, the Congress created a Committee of Clothing to handle the receipt and distribution of the bounty coats and other clothing that was daily arriving at their storehouse in Watertown.¹¹ At that time, the new committee was directed to:

...receive from the Committee of Supplies Buttons provided by them for said Coats, and to cause them to be Buttoned accordingly, also to be divided into Parcels sufficient for a Regiment, and shaded as nearly as possible for Uniforms; and they are likewise impowered to draw on the Public Treasury for defraying the Charges of Buttoning as aforesaid...¹²

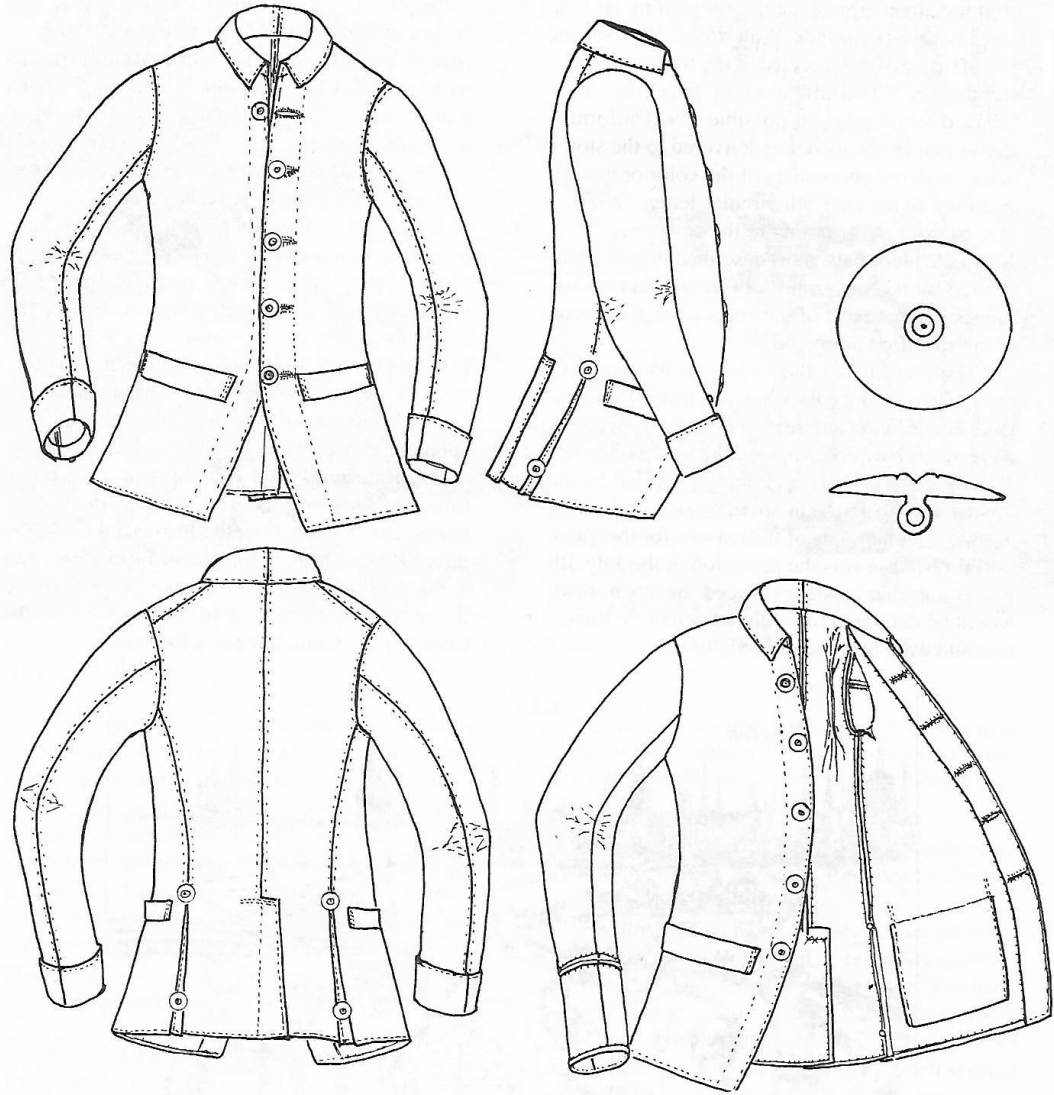


Figure 2: Workman's Linen Jacket, c. 1780. Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society.

The communities responded to the call for clothing almost immediately. Beginning on July coats began to arrive at Watertown. By August 10, 441 coats were received at the public clothing storehouse.¹³ The direction to have the coats “shaded as nearly as possible for Uniforms” shows that the coats being delivered to the storehouse were not necessarily of the color or quality specified in the July 5th circular letter. While a few deserter descriptions in the early months of 1776 note blue coats, most described light or cloth colored short coats, some with numbered buttons, suggesting that most of the coats were gradations of the specified drab color.¹⁴

The majority of the bounty coats appear to have been produced within the time frame established by the Congress. Numerous payments were given between August 10th and September 30th for coats and other clothing provided by the towns, much of it sent in by regional clothing agents.¹⁵ Perhaps one of the reasons for the quick initial response was the provision in the July 5th resolution that coats produced by each town would be delivered to soldiers from those towns, or could even be given directly to the soldier if

they provided a receipt to the Provincial Congress for payment.¹⁶ The buttons soon followed, with an initial shipment of 5797 dozen buttons from Joseph Jones Jr. of Mendon, Massachusetts, that were received on July 28th.¹⁷ These were not transferred to the Committee of Clothing until September 18th.

Regiments began to receive coats on August 2nd, when 108 coats were received by the soldiers of Col. William Prescott’s Tenth Regiment, now part of the newly established Continental Army.¹⁸ More coats were received sporadically by the regiments throughout the months of August and September.

By October 1775, with the onset of cooler weather, large numbers of coats had been received by the Committee of Clothing. It quickly became apparent that provincial efforts to distribute the coats produced by individual towns at different times to their own soldiers was a logistical nightmare. On October 21st, the Provincial Congress directed that those towns desiring to have their coats delivered to their own men were to do so themselves, with buttons to be furnished to the towns by the Committee of Clothing.¹⁹



Figure 3: “Political Electricity,” Anonymous, 1770. Detail.

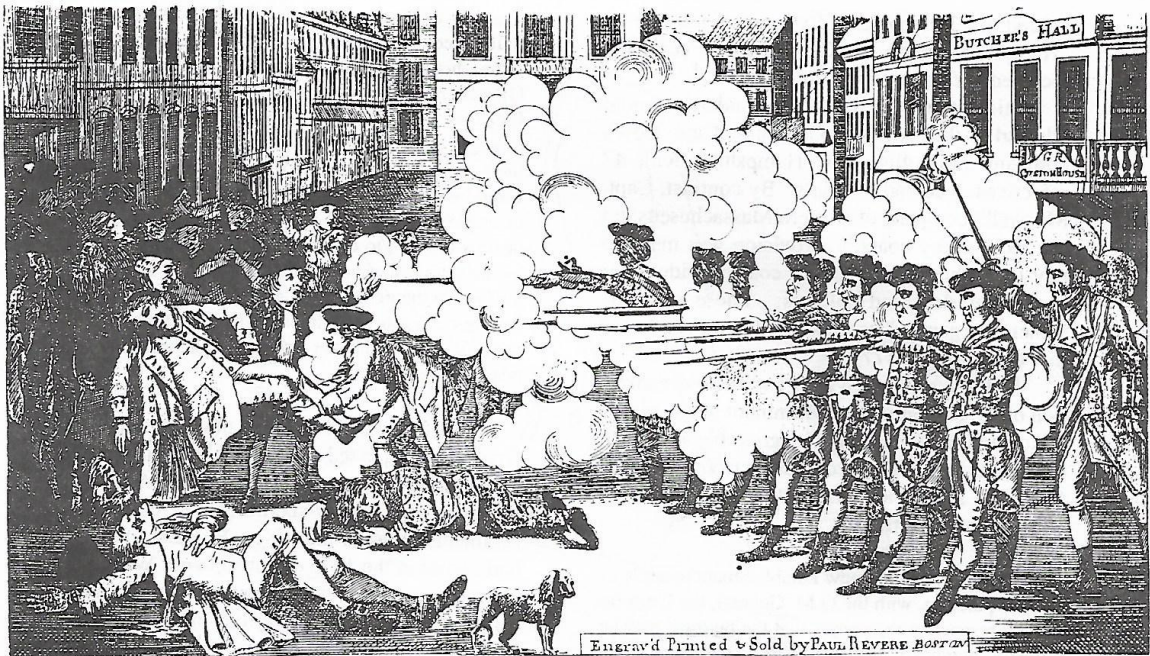


Figure 4: "Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street in Boston, March 5, 1770," engraving by Paul Revere, 1771. Detail.

The supply of coats was not the only problem the Committee had to contend with. Some coats were better made than others, with pockets, canvas staying in the fronts, or worsted or mohair worked buttonholes in lieu of linen. Their makers wanted more for these coats than the 4 shillings allowed by the province. In addition, while more numbered buttons had arrived by mid-October, the supply was insufficient to meet regimental needs. By October 23rd, the Provincial Congress adjusted their bounty coat resolutions:

Resolved that the Committee of Clothing procure those Buttons that are purchas'd for the purpose, to be set on those Coats that they now have or may hereafter receive without Buttons as soon as may be, and this without any respect to the Numbers of the Regiments as was first propos'd.

...That they make Allowance for Pockets, thread, staying, Worsted or Mohair for Button holes, as they shall judge reasonable, and for transporting the Coats to Watertown having proper regard to the weight thereof.

If any coat that shall be brought appear to be more ordinary than common that the Committee take more particular care that such be delivered according to these directions.²⁰

By November, more coats were made available to the troops. Prescott's Regiment received a second shipment of 286 coats.²¹

While we can never be certain that all of the coats issued to the regiment were made according to the Congress specifications, it did provide a greater degree of uniformity than would otherwise have been present. It appears that the number of coats received from the towns in 1775 fell short of the number of troops in the field. In the case of Col. Prescott's regiment, the combined July and November deliveries amounted to only 75% of the mustered strength.²² Within the regiment, on a company level, receipt of coats varied greatly. Twenty-five Groton men of Capt. Farwell's company acknowledged receipt of 25 "Coats Manufactured at Groton", while thirteen Groton men in Capt. Moors company received coats

valued at 23/9 apiece.²³ By comparison, the 23 "Hampshire men" of Capt. Moors company received 25/ per man in lieu of a coat.²⁴

This latter sum was the standard amount allowed by the Provincial Congress. Capt. Dow's company of Hollis, New Hampshire, with 47 effectives, received 47 coats. By contrast, Capt. Maxwell's company of western Massachusetts did not receive any coats.²⁵ Provision was made to pay the value of the bounty coat to widows or parents of deceased soldiers. These reimbursements began in December 1775 and continued into the spring of 1777.²⁶

With the onset of winter and the reorganization of the besieging army imminent, Gen. Washington and the Provincial Congress began to turn their attention to the need to cloth troops through 1776. In his General Orders of November 13, 1775, he ordered that:

The Colonels upon the new Establishment to settle as soon as possible, with the Q.M. General, the Uniform of their respective regiments; that the buttons may be properly number'd and the work finished without delay.²⁷

One month later, the Commander in Chief clarified his order:

...and as uniformity and decency in dress, are essentially necessary in the appearance & regularity of the Army, his Excellency recommends it earnestly to the Officers to put themselves in a proper Uniform - The Field Officers of each of the new Corps, will set the example, by cloathing themselves in a Regimental of their respective Corps; and it is not doubted but the Captains & Subalterns will immediately follow the example: The General by no means recommends, or desires officers to run into costly or expensive Regimentals; no matter how plain or coarse, so they are but uniform in their colour, cut, and Fashion: The Officers belonging to those Regiments whose uniforms are not yet fix'd upon, had better delay making their Regimentals until they are.²⁸

With the close of the year, the "Massachusetts Grand Army" passed into history, to be supplanted by a fledgling Continental Army. The Army was composed of twenty-six numbered continental regiments, most of them New England units that had served in the 1775 establishment. Within the year, that number would increase to eighty-eight regiments under the pay of the Continental Congress. Clothing these men quickly taxed domestic resources, and it soon became necessary to import cloth and uniform clothing from France. The establishment of independence in 1776 changed the politics of military clothing once again, and

Lapels vs. Facings: Clarification of the Terminology

The Committee Resolution directs that the coats should be faced, but should have no lapels. We often used the terms "facings" and "lapels" synonymously, so the resolution appears to contradict itself.

What first appears to be a contradiction is really nothing more than a distinction between parts of the coat. The coat is to be "faced"; that is, to have a strip of cloth sewn along the inside front edges to give added strength and to reinforce the buttonholes and buttons. The "lapels" are extensions of the front breast of some coats that could be folded back to reveal the lining or facing of a similar or contrasting color. Lapels became the distinction of European military coats throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. This is distinguished from "facings", a more general term referring to all the parts of the coat that turned back (lapels, cuffs, cape).

The association of "faced," "facing," "lapel," and "turnback" all have their origins in the latter part of the seventeenth century, when the fullness of early coats was turned back at the breast and sleeve, exposing the material with which the coat was faced. This facing was often of a contrasting color to the body of the coat. By the middle of the eighteenth century these would be made as separate components and constructed of the same cloth as the coat shell to give them strength and durability.

Thus, the resolution of July 5, 1775, indicates that the coats are to be faced on the inside front edges with the same material of which they are made, but are not to have turned back lapels, which by that time were considered a distinctly military affectation. This would reduce the time and material cost of making each coat, while providing a garment that would be sturdy, warm, and functional.

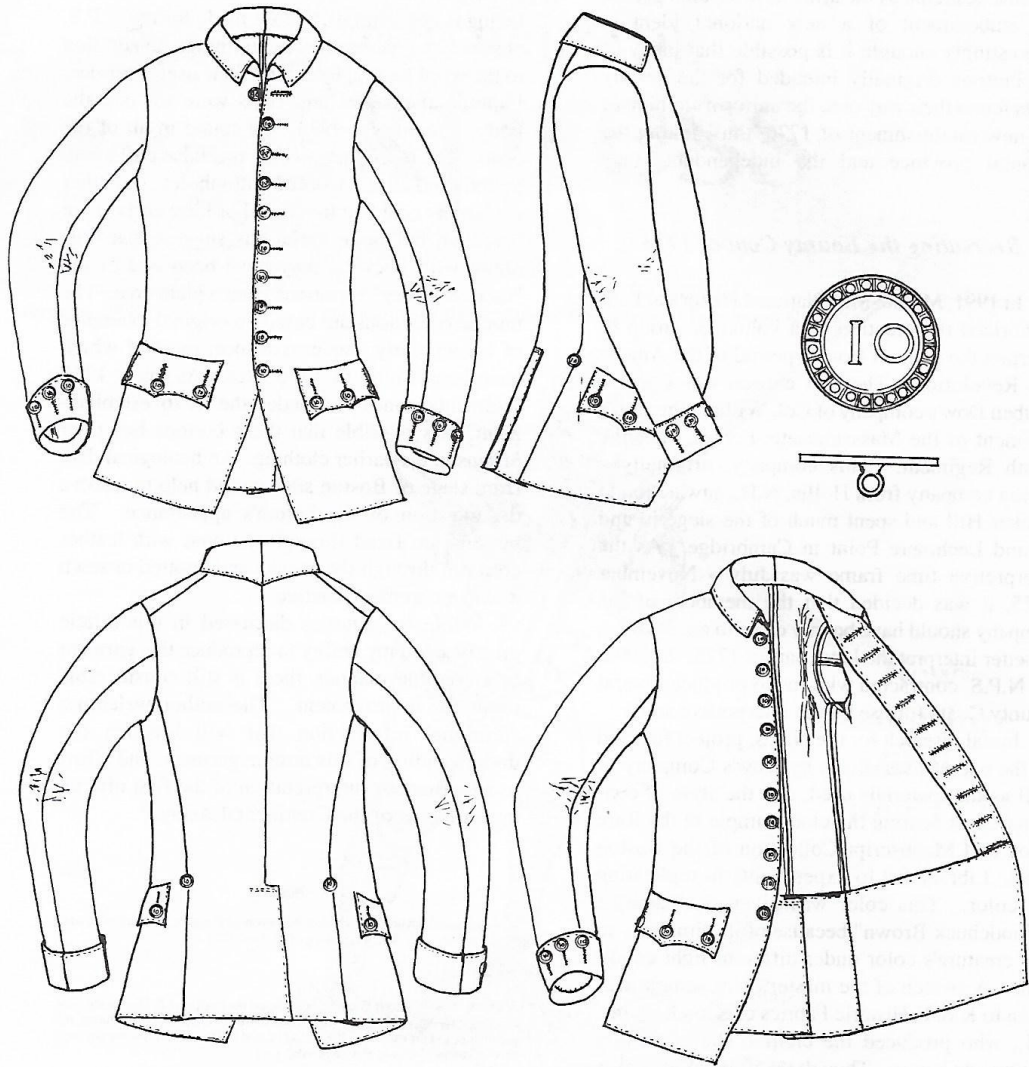


Figure 5: Recreated Massachusetts Bounty Coat, c. 1775.

military uniforms, styled on European models, became desirable as the army now became part of the embodiment of a new national identity. Interestingly enough, it is possible that many of the buttons originally intended for the bounty coats found their way onto the uniform clothing of the new establishment of 1776, thus linking the colonial province and the independent state.

Recreating the Bounty Coat of 1775

In 1991, Minute Man National Historical Park authorized the creation of a volunteer group to interpret the siege of Boston period of the American Revolution. The unit chosen was Captain Reuben Dow's company of Col. William Prescott's regiment of the Massachusetts Forces, later the Tenth Regiment. This company, originally a militia company from Hollis, N.H., saw action at Bunker Hill and spent much of the siege in and around Lechmere Point in Cambridge. As the interpretive time frame was July - November 1775, it was decided that the members of the company should have bounty coats to enable them to better interpret the latter part of 1775. In 1993, the N.P.S. contracted with me to produce several Bounty Coats for use by the interpretive staff.

Initial research for the N.P.S. project focused on the use of these coats by Dow's Company as well as the materials used, and the style of construction. Locating the cloth sample in the Rare Book and Manuscript Collection of the Boston Public Library led to experiments in replicating the color. This color was given the name of "Woodchuck Brown" because of its similarity to that creature's color under different light conditions. A swatch of the master color sample was given to K & K Historic Fabrics of Scotch Plains, N.J., who produced the cloth. The cloth is a lightweight kersey. Though the original sample is probably a broadcloth, there appears to have been enough variations in the materials of the original coats to justify the use of kersey, which also permitted the coat to be made within budget.

The Bounty Coat, as it was reproduced, would probably qualify as "more ordinary than common" (Figure 5). More recent research suggests that the original coats were made without linings, having

only the self wool facing on the front edges and skirt, per the 5 July 1775 resolution (the skirt facing is conjectural). Those made for the N.P.S. contract had unbleached linen linings, in addition to the wool facing, to extend their useful service. Functional pockets and flaps were set into the body, a feature probably not found in all of the coats. The reproduction coat has false cuffs with buttons and closed worked buttonholes. Whether the bounty coat had functional or false cuffs is not revealed, but price variations suggest that this, along with pockets, may have been one of the "more ordinary" variations from a plain coat. The numbered buttons are based on original examples of known early war provenance, most of which have been found in 1776 sites. As many 1775 regiments continued under the 1776 establishment, it is possible that these buttons had their origins in the earlier clothing. Archeological data from siege of Boston sites would help to resolve the question of the button's appearance. The buttons are fixed through the coat with leather cord run through the shanks and knotted or sewn down, a common practice.

While the sources discussed in this article greatly aided my ability to reproduce this garment in a credible manner, there is still considerable room for improvement. The author welcomes additional information that will broaden our understanding of this unique garment, and allow us to refine our interpretation of the first official uniform coat of the Continental Army.²⁹

Notes

1. Massachusetts Archives, "Records of the Provincial Congress, 22 April to 30 May 1775," Ms. Volume, Vol. 31. Session of 23 April 1775.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Steven C. Eames, *Rustic Warriors: Warfare and the Provincial Soldier on the New England Frontier, 1689-1748*. Unpublished Ms., 1995, pp. 197-198. During the expeditions to Port Royal in 1707 and 1711, and to Quebec in 1709, the province gave its soldiers both red and blue coats.

4. Massachusetts Archives, "Records of the Provincial Congress, 31 May to 19 July 1775," Ms. Volume, Vol. 32. Session of 29 June 1775.

5. *Ibid.* Session of 5 July 1775.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Circular Letter dated "Watertown, July 6th 1775" and addressed to "the Gentlemen the Select men of Stoughtonham" on the reverse of the printed form. Broadside, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, Boston Public Library, Boston, MA.

8. Massachusetts Historical Society, *Caleb Davis Papers*, Ms. Based on a survey of the accounts of Caleb Davis with tailors Caleb Coolidge, Elisha Cowley, Joseph