

British & German Army Women

In 1777 the British army and its German auxiliaries both followed the European custom of campaigning accompanied by a small number of soldiers' wives. These women worked for the army as laundresses and nurses, or cleaned and sewed for the soldiers. Some also sold goods to the soldiers as petty sutlers. Along with their children, they drew rations from the army. In the British army, women were allotted a half ration and children a quarter ration until the age of ten.

In May 1777, the British army in New York records a ratio of 8 to 1, soldiers to women. The number of children was also recorded and their numbers were nearly as great as those of the women. Among the German troops, the ratio was 30 to 1.

In June of 1777, the orderly book of the 40th regiment of foot records the number of women allotted to each company:

"Four Women Pr Compy of Companys of 50 & 8 Women Pr Compy of Companys of 100 are Allowed to Embark with their Respective Regiments and to be Victualud According to the Former Regulations the Remainder of the Women and Children of their Corps will be sent to NYork where A proportion of provisions & Qrs or Old Camp Equipage will be provided them"

Officer's wives also traveled with them on occasion, though they were more likely to stay near-by than in camp.



During the Saratoga campaign, the ranks of women following the British army swelled dramatically with the arrival of loyalist refugees. By October of 1777, the army was purportedly trailed by two thousand women, though just under three hundred were official camp followers.

One of the best descriptions we have of these women discusses those following the German contingent, as the British army marched to Cambridge Massachusetts after their defeat and capture at Saratoga in October. Hannah Winthrop describes the spectacle near her Cambridge home to Mercy Warren in a letter, dated November 11, 1777:

"Last thursday, which was a very stormy day, a large number of British Troops came softly thro the Town via Watertown to Prospect hill, on Friday we heard the Hessians were to make a Procession in the same rout; we thot we should have nothing to do with them, but View them as they Passt. To be sure, the sight was truly astonishing, I never had the least Idea that the Creation produced such a sordid set of creatures in human Figure—poor, dirty, emaciated men, great numbers of women, who seemd to be the beasts of burthen, having a bushel basket on their back, by which they were bent double, the contents seemd to be Pots & kettles, various sorts of Furniture, children peeping thro the gridirons & other utensils, Some very young Infants who were born on the road; the women with bare feet, cloathd in dirty raggs such Effluvia filld the air while they were passing, had they not been smoaking all the time, I should have been apprehensive of being contaminated by them."



Among other tasks, these women worked as laundresses– a task which often resulted in reprimands for working too close to camp and risking the contamination of soldier’s drinking water with soap and filth. Some women also ran small “sutlery” businesses, selling goods to the troops. This also frequently resulted in reprimands, especially when alcohol was involved. A Grenadier Battalion Orderly Book from Saratoga, records orders from Three Mile Point, on July 2, 1777:

“As much evil is like to Arise from the Intemperance and irregularity of Savages, it is positively Ordered that no Officer should give them Liquor, and that no soldier, Soldiers Wife, Suttler, or follower of the Army should presume to sell them any.”

Similarly, on July 23, 1777, General Burgoyne, stationed at Skeinesborough, sent out orders stating that:

“Lieut. Atherton is appointed to act as Provost to this Army... he has Orders to enforces in the strictest manner, the Regulation of the 18th Inst. [as pertained to the camp at Ticonderoga] relative to the vending of Spirituous Liquors by the Sutlers or any other followers of the Army. For this purpose he is directed diligently to examine all Huts, Tents, or other abodes in the rear of the Encampment, and wherever any Person shall be found trafficking without a permit from the Adjutant General, or (having such a permit) of retailing spirituous Liquors to Soldiers, Women or Savages, or presuming to sell such liquors to Servants of Officers or other Persons whatsoever without a Certificate in writing signed by a Commission Officer, the Provost is instantly to make the Offender Prisoner, to have all the Liquors belonging to him or her destroyed, and burn the dwelling.”

Though alcohol was by far the most popular choice, sutlers also sold others goods, including food stuff, and necessities like soap.



Like the soldiers they followed, when the army was on the move these women had to carry all of their personal possessions with them. This dictates a certain minimalism when it comes to personal items and wardrobes. Gear might be carried in packs, baskets or market wallets. Blankets were tied to bags, or carried tied around the body. When encamped, this equipment could be left in barracks or shelters, but should camp be struck for march, all could be packed quickly, and easily carried by these camp followers.

By the 1770's every-day clothing for British women consists of a gown, worn over a shift, stays – which provide the correct fashionable conical silhouette, pockets, and two or so petticoats. One's skirt front is protected by an apron, most commonly of an easily-laundered material such as white or checked linen. The bosom is covered – for fashion, sun protection, and modesty – by a neck handkerchief, and the hair is dressed, then covered by a white cap – once again this is fashionable, but also practical, as it helps keep rarely-washed hair free of dust. When outside, a hat or bonnet helps keep off the sun. The style for women's shoes of this period is for high-heels, with fabric uppers, closing like men's shoes with buckles.

Images of camp followers show them following the current fashions wherever possible. Despite the challenges of life on campaign, like all people, they strived to maintain their identities by dressing as they might in civilian life. In this era self-identity and self-respect are largely tied up with self-presentation. They were defined by their clothing, and therefore strived to dress respectably and fashionably. That said, these were hard-working women, and on campaign they had minimal access to consumer goods. At times they wore more relaxed working garments, and occasionally adopted pieces out of their husband's military wardrobes, especially essentials like shoes and hats.



Shift

Best: hand-stitched in white linen with sleeves gathered into narrow cuffs at the elbows. Cuffs should close with sleeve buttons, or ties threaded through buttonholes. Neck opening should be large; with a gown or jacket on, the shift should only barely be visible around the neckline.

Acceptable: Machine-stitched (ideally hand-finished) in white linen with elbow length sleeves.

Unacceptable: Long sleeves, obvious machine sewing, gathered neckline, neck or sleeve ruffles longer than 1.25 inches.

Stays (Must be covered, unless carefully documented to a specific impression)

Best: Hand-sewn, fully boned stays with worsted or linen exterior fabric, the most common colors being dark green, blue or white. Stays should create a proper 1770's silhouette, which is to say a smooth conical torso. Most stays in this period are back lacing.

Acceptable: Machine-sewn stays which produce the correct silhouette. Partially boned stays, leather stays. No stays, if worn with a bedgown, or other loose-fitting garment. This is acceptable only for women doing serious manual labor, those portraying the ill, or those in a state of undress early in the morning, or after retiring for the evening.

Unacceptable: Unboned bodices.



Upper body garment

Best: Hand-sewn, stomacher-fronted or center-front closing English style gown in worsted or linen. Printed cotton textiles must be well-documented to the period. By the 1770's gowns are far and away the most common wardrobe choice for British women. To that end, the majority of reenactors portraying English women should be dressed in gowns to accurately simulate the period.

Acceptable: Hand-finished gown, fitted jacket, or bedgown.

Unacceptable: Sleeveless bodices. Fitted garments such as gowns or jackets worn without stays. Short gowns (a uniquely American garment, unlikely to be worn by European women). Garments made of printed cottons with designs not documented to the period, such as modern calicos, and cabbage roses.

Petticoats

Best: Hand-sewn petticoats in wool or linen, solid-colored, striped, or matching a gown or jacket. Length should be between low-calf and ankle. (Petticoat length varies to some extent - generally shorter petticoats are more suited to physical labor, and worn more by continental European women.) Circumference should be 2.5 to 3 yards. Petticoats should be pleated to waistbands and have pocket slits at the sides. Hems should be small. Alternately, the bottom edge can be bound with wool tape. Ideally, the outer petticoat would be supported with one or more under petticoats.

Acceptable: One or more hand-finished petticoats of the proper length.

Unacceptable: Modern skirts, petticoats without sufficient fullness, or shorted than mid-calf.



Pockets

Worn underneath the petticoats and accessible through the pocket slits, most period pockets are quite large, and are used to store all sorts of women's personal items. Some pockets were beautifully embroidered, but most of the time pockets will not show. Pockets should absolutely be worn beneath another layer of clothing.

Apron

Best: Hand-sewn, white or checked. Most aprons are linen, or wool for work. Aprons should be long enough to cover a majority of the petticoat, and at least a yard in width.

Unacceptable: Very short or very narrow aprons. Wildly colored aprons. Aprons longer than the petticoats they are worn with. Decorative aprons with ruffles or lace (unless portraying an officer's wife).

Neck Handkerchief

Best: White linen or cotton cut in a triangle, or a square folded into a triangle, large enough to be draped around the shoulders and cover the bosom. Less commonly: checked material, colors, or printed cotton. Neck handkerchiefs can be worn under the neckline of the gown or pinned to the front of the gown.

Acceptable: Any sort of neck handkerchief properly worn. The vast majority of images show everyday women wearing some sort of handkerchief covering.

Unacceptable: Handkerchief tucked into the sides of the gown neckline, exposing the bosom.



Cap

Best: There are a wide variety of cap styles in use in the 1770's. In general, cap and hair styles have some height and volume in this period. Caps should be hand-sewn out of fine white linen or cotton organdy. Most cap styles have a gathered or pleated ruffle around the face. Caps may be trimmed with silk ribbon. Caps should be starched if possible.

Unacceptable: Mob caps (circular caps consisting of one piece of material gathered to create both caul and ruffle). Caps worn down over the forehead. No cap.

Hair

Best: This will depend on social class. That said, hair styles in the 1770's are fairly large. Even women camp followers are probably attempting to follow fashions. Hair should be put up under a cap, with most of the volume on top (not at the back) of the head. Some hair should show above the forehead, and this hair may have some volume to it. Dressing hair with pomade and minimal powder is encouraged.

Acceptable: Hair pulled back or pinned up on top of the head and covered with a cap.

Unacceptable: Hair worn in a bun at the back of the head. Hair down, or left completely undressed. Large, elaborate high fashion styles.

Hat/head covering

Best: Flat, shallow-crowned straw, felt, or fabric covered hat with a diameter no more than 18". Black silk bonnet with flat brim and gathered crown. Some soldier's wives (perhaps especially German wives, who are depicted doing so) likely wore their husband's black felt hats.

Unacceptable: Hats folded down over the ears. Straw hats with rounded modern crowns.



Outerwear

Best: Wool cloaks, mostly commonly red, closed with ties. Most images of cloaks show them being mid-calf- to waist-length. Wool, silk, linen, or leather mitts for forearms. German camp followers are occasionally depicted wearing cast-off regimental coats.

Unacceptable: Celtic-style or fantasy cloaks. Cloaks closing with decorative metal clasps.

Stockings

Best: White or grey wool yarn or worsted stockings with back seams, ending above the knee. Stockings should be held up with leather or cloth tape garters tied above or below the knee.

Acceptable: White, natural, or colored stockings of wool yarn, worsted, linen or cotton.

Unacceptable: Striped stockings, polyester stockings, athletic socks, modern tights. Though stockings with decorative "clocks" were occasionally worn in the period, few modern reproductions are accurate.

Shoes

Best: Reproduction high-heeled shoes with buckles, with fabric exterior, especially hardwearing worsteds. Bare feet or men's shoes, if portraying ragged camp follower.

Acceptable: Reproduction black, brown or red leather heeled shoes with buckles or low-heeled shoes with buckles, mules.

Unacceptable: Modern shoes.



Jewelry

Best: No jewelry, outside of officer's wives impressions.

Acceptable: Small period earrings, non-obtrusive studs in non-earlobe piercings.

Unacceptable: Obvious modern jewelry, especially in any non-earlobe piercings

Transporting Goods and Personal Items:

Best: Pockets (hidden), appropriate baskets, market wallets, military packs. Wheel barrows (along with baskets, for petty-sutler impressions)

Unacceptable: Haversacks, modern baskets.

Blankets

Best: White Handwoven British Army Issue blanket with white or brown stripes and Government Stamp, 2-3 Point, Dutch, or Rose blankets.

Acceptable: Plain white blankets.

Unacceptable: Civil War grey blankets, or modern olive drab blankets.

