



# Building a 1750's North Carolina Militia Impression

## Purpose

Reenactors are encouraged to come to events held by Fort Dobbs and to portray typical civilians and militia soldiers from Western North Carolina from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While the site wants is open to reenactors we understand that many reenactors in the area haven't done French and Indian war reenacting before, and this is intended as a helpful guide to altering your impressions to portray a member of the militia of North Carolina from the time of the French and Indian War.

## Background

The militia of North Carolina was in a very poor state at the beginning of 1754, when war began. The state of the militia was one of the reasons the colony decided to raise provincial soldiers, but they always kept the militia ready for use at home. Matthew Rowan, as acting governor, admitted, "Our militia had been very much neglected," In fact the most current militia law was from 1746! The most exposed Counties were Rowan and Anson in the West. Matthew Rowan praised the populations of those counties as, "'brave Industrious people their Militia amounts to upwards of three thousand Men and increasing fast.'"<sup>1</sup> However the actual numbers were considerably less, when the militia could actually be counted it amounted to fewer than 1000 men.

Additionally the men were poorly equipped, Governor Dobbs reported to his superiors consistently that, "There is not half of the Militia armed."<sup>2</sup> even in the middle of the war an officer from Granville county related how members, "of the Company Appear'd without any Arms, I would cut them Clubs to perform the Exercise, which was before there Usal custom, and is this day, of Chief Part of Regiment, which is wink'd at, by the Officer Commanding them, in Order to Curry favour with the people." Eventually he was able to make, "them Appear, as well Arm'd as the Poverty of the Country will Admit off," Poverty seems to have been a big factor in getting properly equipped for militia service. Rowan had admitted that he would need, "£1,000 to buy arms and ammunition for the poorer Inhabitants of Rowan & Anson Countys"<sup>3</sup>

As the war wore on militia men seemed to be able to appear better equipped. Dobbs received a shipment of 1000 Dutch military muskets, bayonets, cartridge boxes, scabbards, frogs and belts in 1755. He, "sent 150 to the western Frontier to arm the

---

<sup>1</sup> Rowan to Board of Trade, June 28, 1753, in William L. Saunders, ed. *The Colonial Records of North Carolina, Vol. V- 1752-1759* (Raleigh, Josephus Daniels, 1887), 24-25.

<sup>2</sup> Dobbs to Board of Trade, July 12, 1756. Saunders, *Colonial Records*, 603.

<sup>3</sup> Rowan to Board of Trade, March 19, 1754, . Saunders, *Colonial Records*, 109.

militia of two counties there,” but admitted that after that he would need at least 2000 more muskets to fully supply the militia.<sup>4</sup>

The militia law ordered each man to appear with, “a Gun, fit for service, a Cartouch Box, and a Sword, Cutlass, or Hanger, and at least Twelve Charges of Powder and Ball, or Swan Shot, and Six Spare Flints,”<sup>5</sup> With this the citizens of the colony would be prepared , in theory, to repel invasion or attack. They were required to muster by companies a couple times a year to train, learn the manual of arms and practice military drill. One such drill is disparagingly described by a Moravian in Bethabara in 1754:

“On the morning of Oct. 30th Col. Schmidt rode through our yard, and without permission held Muster in our meadow, for his five companies. ... Capt. Guest was very considerate, he stopped and spoke to us only in passing, for fear others would follow him in, and gave orders to his company to stay out of our yard, but nearly all the rest rode right through. The noise and shooting frightened our horses badly, and the four new horses broke away into the woods. ... In general the people behaved better than is usual on such occasions, though this does not apply to Capt. Hampy and his men. During dinner they passed through our yard and we asked that the beating of the drums cease because it frightened our horses and made them tear around the wagons, etc. They not only refused our request, but began shooting in addition. Capt. Hampy did not know the road through our farm, and when we offered to show it to him replied that he would ride where he pleased and make a way through our fences. After the Muster the men were so full of whiskey that they fought each other until they were covered with blood. However, through all the tumult, we safely continued our work. We hope the soldiers will hereafter find another place for Muster, and not use our land.”<sup>6</sup>

This shows the rowdy nature of most militia musters, as well as indicating that the militia of North Carolina using drums to beat for commands, like most military formations.

The militia’s service was consistent if not glorious. With news of the defeat of General Edward’s Braddock’s army Pennsylvania the frontier from Virginia to North Carolina braced for possible attacks. Dobbs, “gave directions to put the frontier in the best State of Defense against the Indian incursions, by having 100 select men in Readiness to joyn our Frontier Company,”<sup>7</sup> These militia men were from Anson and Rowan counties whose officers he had ordered a, “piquet to be chosen out of the most active men of the Militia of each County with a chosen officer at their head of fifty men each” These select militia men were given, “a central place of rendezvous to be fixed for each to the northward and Southward of our Frontier Company, to be under Captain Waddell’s command, to join him when necessary or for him to march to assist them in case of any incursion,”<sup>8</sup> Captain Waddell being stationed at the site of what would become Fort Dobbs.

Militia troops continued to act in this capacity and once were even sent out to attack a band of thieves. During the Cherokee war they acted, under the command of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Dobbs to Lord Loudoun, July 10, 1756. Saunders, *Colonial Records*, 597.

<sup>5</sup> An Act for the Better Regulating the Militia of this Government. June 28, 1746. Walter Clark, ed. *Laws of North Carolina*, 244-245.

<sup>6</sup> Records of the Moravians, 1754,

<http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/sections/hp/colonial/Bookshelf/Moravian/cont.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Dobbs to ?, Aug. 25, 1755. Saunders, *Colonial Records*, 419-420.

<sup>8</sup> Dobbs to Board of Trade. Aug 14, 1755. Saunders, *Colonial Records*, 357-358.

Provincial officers like Waddell, to scout the area when news of Indian movements or attacks were reported. Indian raiding parties struck the backcountry settlements and occasionally the militia was actually able to fight them. On account tells that a, “gang of Cherokees killed several of the settlers on the Catawba River , and it added that a party of militia came up with and engaged them, killed a good many of them whom they scalped and recovered several white scalps.”<sup>9</sup>

War seems to have taken its toll on the backcountry and by 1761 it was reported that, “The Country is greatly exhausted, and the most of the Back Settlements deserted, which a Peace will soon resettle.”<sup>10</sup> The militia of North Carolina had served its communities admirably, however they refused to serve anywhere but in their area. The service of the militia is an important part of the French and Indian War in North Carolina, and we are eager to interpret that role at Special Events at Fort Dobbs

## Impressions

Building an impression of the North Carolina Militia soldier is a great first step to get involved in reenacting the French and Indian War. Whether new to the hobby of reenacting or a veteran reenactor of a different time period the following are intended to help in building an impression of a North Carolina Militia private, from 1754-1761.

## Clothing

Militia members wore their civilian clothing and therefore a wide variety of clothing would be seen in a militia company. Generally the clothing of the labouring class is a good road to following developing a militia impression. There are a few descriptions of civilians from the French and Indian War period that give some details of dress worn by the people living in this part of North Carolina.

August 29, 1754

RUN away on the third of May last, from Capt. Robert Harris, of Rocky river, in Anson county, North Carolina, two Dutch servants, viz. a man and his wife; the man named Hermanus Hagen, about 30 years of age, of a low stature, with black hair: Had on, an old hat, blue coat, brown jacket, with brass buttons, and square toed shoes; and had a bag on his back, of a large bulk. The woman named Catherina, in a Dutch dress, with a damask petticoat, and a brown one, can speak some English, and have a little white dog with them.<sup>11</sup>

Although slaves were not particularly common in Western North Carolina compared to the Eastern part of the colony, descriptions of them indicate common clothing for working class men in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century:

---

<sup>9</sup> South Carolina Gazette, April 12, 1760.

<sup>10</sup> Pennsylvania Gazette, Sept. 24, 1761.

<sup>11</sup> Pennsylvania Gazette, Aug. 29, 1754

NOW in Princess Anne County Goal, a Negroe Fellow, who says his Name is Tapley, about 5 Feet and an half high, says he belongs to Joshua Campbell, in Currituck, North Carolina, has on a striped woolen Jacket and Trousers, and an old knit Cap. The Owner may have him of me, paying Charges.

North-Carolina, Sept. 24, 1755. RAN away from the Subscriber, in Bertie County near Meherrin River, on the 20th Instant, Three Negroe Men Slaves, viz. Jemmy, an Eboe Negroe, about 5 Feet 10 Inches high of a yellow Complexion, very sly and crafty, speaks seldom, tho' tolerable good English; about 35 Years of Age; had on when he went away, a close double-breasted grey Bear-skin Coat, with a black Velvet Cape, and Twist Buttons, pretty much worn; he had both a white and an Oznabrigs Shirt, a Pair of white Linen Breeches, Crocus Trousers, and carried with him a Gun. John, says he was born in France, about the same Stature and Age, much pitted with the Small-Pox, speaks quick and broken, has small hollow Eyes; he took with him two white Shirts, one coarse the other fine, an Oznabrig ditto, a Pair of blue and yellow Cloth Breeches, a blue Duffil great Coat, a red Duffil and striped Ticken Jacket, with several Pair of Stocking. Boston, an Angola Negroe, about five Feet eight Inches high, has a Stammering in his Speech, is scarrified by Whipping, and much the Age of the others; took with him a black Duffil and striped Ticken Jacket, a Pair of Crocus Trousers, an Oznabrig Shirt, and a large blue great Coat.<sup>12</sup>

In addition there are some descriptions are of men who left North Carolina, but still speak to common clothing elements:

Philadelphia, Nov. 26, 1760.

LAST Night, about Twelve o'Clock, was stolen from the Subscriber, out of the Stable of Leonard Melchior, of this City, Innholder, an Iron Roan Stallion, about fifteen Hands high, branded on the near Buttock I H, about 8 Years old. The Fellow who stole him is a German, and calls himself Francis, pretends to speak twelve Languages, and says he was obliged to leave his Habitation in North Carolina on Account of the Indian War, He is about 20 Years of Age, a short fat well set Fellow, and is flush of Money. Had on a brown Cloth Coat, pretty much worn, a Pair of Boots, Leather Breeches, and an old Hat. He also stole from the Subscriber, a whitish Great coat, Horse whip, and a Pocket book, with about Five Pounds in Money in it.<sup>13</sup>

Like anything, Runaway ads have to be taken with a grain of salt, as we don't know how much the person changed their clothing to run away, or stole clothing to run away, but they can still be important in letting us know what was available at the time.

Some things that frequently come up in working class clothing are jackets and trousers. Short length jackets were practical working wear for a man in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and imagery showing men working in such garments is common, particularly those in agricultural and nautical occupations. In addition the legwear of choice for working men seem to be leather breeches and trousers. Leather is an obvious choice because it wears well, and trousers cover breeches and protect the garments while allowing a full range of motion for the legs. Trousers seem to have been common in this part of North Carolina.

Imagery from the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century shows working men in short jackets, breeches or trousers and felt hats cut round. The following images illustrate the typical farmer or tradesmen of the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact many men seem to wear short, functional jackets that are seen on images of sailors as well. The main difference

---

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Gazette, Oct. 17, 1755.

<sup>13</sup> Pennsylvania Gazette, Nov. 1760.

between depictions of farmers and sailors seems to largely be that farmers wear breeches while sailors wear trousers. In addition sailors are often pictured with smaller hats, for practicality's sake moving through the rigging of ships whereas farmers often have wider brimmed hats to keep the sun off their faces. But the similarities are probably due to the fact that both men need functional clothing without full skirts, and big cuffs that would get in the way of their work, and leg wear that is easy to work in, and durable.

Clothing that was fitted and made for the wearer would not have been terribly uncommon in 1750's North Carolina. Rowan County could count fully 10 tailors working in 1759, making almost exclusively clothing for men.<sup>14</sup> The Moravians had tailors and they made clothing for outsiders as well as for those within the United Brethren. Clothing was not difficult to find in Western North Carolina. Cloth was being imported from Europe and sold by merchants in Salisbury and fabric was also being made in the county itself.



Left: 1757 image of poor men.  
 Center: 2 images of Farmers, 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 18<sup>th</sup> century.  
 Right: 1741 image of a Sailor in jacket and trousers.

Thus a good basic outfit for a North Carolina militia man could include the following:

**Breeches or trousers:** Fall front or fly front were in use by the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century

**Shirt:** Standard 18<sup>th</sup> century style in white or unbleached linen, checks or stripes.

**Jacket or Coat:** Short jackets were very common. Mid century cut, straight front, not cut away, often full forearms, and fuller skirts than later coats.

**Waistcoat:** Many images show men working without waistcoats, and in the heat of the Carolina's it makes sense. Although mid century waistcoats would have been straight cut in front, and as could be as short as crotch length, or almost down to the knees.

**Hat:** There were hundreds of styles of hats, most common of which seems to be a simple round hat, with a brim cut round, and bent up to the owners taste. Linen caps were also common.

<sup>14</sup> Joanna Miller Lewis, *Artisans in the North Carolina Backcountry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 55.

**Stockings:** After white or off-white, blue and black seem to be the most common colours in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century.

With only a little work one could adapt a later impression by replacing a later waistcoat or coat and adding one with a mid century cut. Trousers are an easy way to get a Western North Carolina look from the 1750's. And taking a hat blank and cutting the brim to a size you like, 3", 2", 1 1/2" then mashing the brim up or down where it suits you can go a long way to making your hat look like it is yours, unique, not just a blank from a sutler.

## Weapons

The weapons used by militia men were many and varied. Militia law, (mentioned above) stated that a man should have a serviceable gun. Some clearly did not have weapons and some at least drilled with sticks. However Dobbs statement that the militia was not half armed may be hyperbole. Clearly they at least had a number of Dutch military muskets and bayonets by 1755. In addition there would have been a wide range of old military muskets, civilian fowling pieces and some rifles. Edged weapons were likely carried as the militia law required swords, hangers, or cutlasses. Descriptions of scalping by militia soldiers likely indicate the use of knives as well.

The wide range of reproduction muskets available today allows reenactors a lot of possibilities. When choosing a weapon for a North Carolina Militia man from the 1750's older is better. They would not have been issued top shelf arms (as indicated by 1730's Dutch muskets issued out to the militia). Military weapons would likely have been from early in the century. Most of the inhabitants of Western North Carolina would have come from Pennsylvania, and those that had weapons for militia service may have brought them with them. Rowan County contained roughly 1160 men by the Governors estimate in 1756, and by 1759 had 2 gunsmiths so there was some domestic production, or repair of arms.<sup>15</sup> Rifles used by North Carolina militiamen would likely have been of an early variety, produced by Pennsylvania gunsmiths, and bearing more Germanic features than the later "longrifle." That is shorter barrels, larger calibers, etc. The armament of the provincials was described thusly, "what few arms they had were of different calibers- some wide bores, some small bores; but a great part had no arms at all."<sup>16</sup> This variety would seem to describe the militia of North Carolina accurately as well, and much of the deficiencies they faced were alleviated by the Dutch weapons Dobbs provided them.

As for equipment the militia law specified a cartridge box, so varieties of boxes likely varied depending on what the soldiers had available. It is very likely that militia men carried ammunition in the typical shot bag and powder horn. Again variety is the common theme. What knapsacks, haversacks, etc. were carried is not known. Militia men were called to muster only a few times a year and then only for the day so often probably did not carry these items. However as the war wound on and militia men were

---

<sup>15</sup> Dobbs to Board of Trade, July 12, 1756. Saunders, *Colonial Records*, 603. Lewis, *Artisans in the North Carolina Backcountry*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> John Maass, "North Carolina and the Seven Years War, 1754-1758," *Military Collector and Historian*, Vol. 55, No. 3, Fall 2003: 155-156.

called upon to be ready, and especially as men drafted from the militia went scouting during the Cherokee they may have been carrying more on them, like blankets, food etc. Or they may have relied on stopping at homes along their route of march. But by 1761 militia members had been called upon to serve for a few days to almost a month against the Cherokee.

## Conclusion

With only a few pieces of 18<sup>th</sup> century clothing or a few simple changes to a Revolutionary War impression one can fairly accurately portray the militia soldier called up by the Colony of North Carolina during the French and Indian War. We hope this guide has been helpful and look forward to seeing you at Fort Dobbs in the future. For more questions, comments, or suggestions about this guide or interpretation at Fort Dobbs please contact Matthew Keagle, at [mkeagle@fortdobbs.org](mailto:mkeagle@fortdobbs.org) or (704) 873-5992.