

Notes on the Clothing and Equipment of the Ohio Militia during the War of 1812
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During the War of 1812, Ohio's military force consisted of the enrolled militia and the volunteer militia. The enrolled militia included all eligible males between 18 and 45, and could be called up by the governor or other authorized official for a period of service usually limited to no more than three months. With some exceptions, they typically served within Ohio's boundaries. The volunteers came from the ranks of the enrolled militia and were those who volunteered to augment the regular Army. They received the same pay and allowances the regulars did and served for extended periods of time; sometimes up to twelve months. Volunteers were subject to federal, not state, authority and could serve in an expeditionary capacity. The enrolled militia provided their own arms and equipment and, at least in theory, the federal government provided arms and equipment for the volunteers.

The Ohio Militia Act of 1803 addressed the enrolled militia and directed that "companies when raised, shall wear, while on parade, such uniform as agreed upon by a majority of the company, and approved by the commanding officer of the regiment." The subsequent militia acts of 1809 and 1811 make no mention of uniforms other than to stipulate how officers would distinguish themselves from other soldiers. Field officers, as a badge of rank, were required to carry swords or hangers while company officers carried spontoons.

These Militia Acts recognized the fact that the militia had little need for, or interest in, purchasing an expensive military uniform for two days' drill per year. Most members of the militia were content to wear their civilian garb as they assembled for muster. In some cases, militia officers appeared for drill outfitted in uniforms of earlier wars. In Highland County, for example, "Commander" Franklin wore "the Revolutionary Blue [uniform] worn by his father, Phillip Franklin, when he viewed the surrender of Cornwallis. He wore buckskin breeches, of a fine buff color. His boots had a silver buckle across the top of his foot. His cocked hat was very impressive with its black ostrich plume. He carried proudly his father's long Revolutionary sword."¹

Some units voted to wear distinctive clothing and codified the unit's requirements in their by-laws. In 1809, Captain William Van Cleve's Dayton Rifle Company wore "deep blue hunting shirts, pantaloons with white fringe, bearskin over their hats, a white plume, a white vest, and a white neck cloth". Recruits for the company had six months to acquire a rifle, shot pouch, powder horn, scalping knife, and tomahawk. If after six months, members appearing for muster without the proper uniform and equipment were assessed fines of twenty-five or fifty cents.²

One account from Marietta describes the pre-war militia as wearing a "swallow-tailed coat made of dark blue cloth; faced and trimmed with buff; buttons of white metal with USA on them; the hat (was) a tall bell crowned affair with no brim except a small visor in front; to which was added a stock for the neck of polished leather wide enough to fit up snug under the chin."³ A second account from Dayton mentions "coats of blue with scarlet collars and cuffs, and cocked hats with a cockade and white feather."⁴ It is likely

that the Marietta narrative describes a post-war militia uniform and the Dayton account describes a regular army uniform coat that Major General William Henry Harrison ordered issued to the militia in autumn, 1812, to offset clothing shortages.

In anticipation of a war with Great Britain, in April, 1812, the government offered militia members who would volunteer to serve with the regular army an incentive of \$16 in addition to their monthly pay, plus a \$40 clothing stipend; equivalent to the cost of an army uniform. Although the volunteers received their \$16 bonus, two months later they had yet to receive either their monthly wages or their clothing allowance. Militia colonel Lewis Cass wrote Senator Worthington asking, "Did the Secy of War read the law? Or did he think \$16 would purchase a man for a year?"⁵ The government eventually issued clothing to the militia, but not in time to help what Governor Meigs termed "the First Army of Ohio". By December, for example, the militia with General Winchester had yet to receive their clothing allowance.

When the war began, self-provided civilian garb - typically hunting frocks - made up the militias' dress. Hunting shirts or frocks in the early 19th century differed from those of the Revolutionary War with longer bodies, narrower sleeves, and standing collars. A contemporary description of a hunting frock is as an outer garment that "reached halfway down the thighs ... open before, and so wide as to lap over a foot or more when belted. The cape was large and sometimes handsomely fringed with a raveled piece of cloth of a different color from that of the hunting shirt itself. The hunting shirt was generally made of linsey, sometimes of coarse linen, and a few of dressed deerskins. The last were very cold and uncomfortable in the winter."⁶ Another writer wrote, "Breeches were made of heavy cloth or of deerskin, and were often worn with leggings of the same material, or of some kind of leather, while the feet were usually encased in moccasins, which were easily and quickly made, though they needed frequent mending ... Hats or caps were made of the various native furs."⁷

As the Northwestern Army assembled in preparation for the march to Detroit, one observer recalled their appearance. "The general and his staff, the colonels of the regiments, and other mounted officers wore plumes in their cocked hats, sabers at their sides, and a pair of huge horse pistols in their saddle holsters. The soldiers were dressed in tow-linen hunting shirts and breeches, low crowned hats with cockades or brass plates placed on the side. The arms for the troops of the line were flintlock muskets with the sixteen-inch bayonet of the period, cross belts sustained [the] cartridge box and bayonet scabbard. They also had the wooden canteens of the time, and a knapsack made of canvas tarred to keep out the wet. The blanket was carried in a roll on top."⁸

Many of the Ohio militia units that reported for duty throughout the war either wore their everyday civilian clothing or distinctive, colored hunting shirts with tomahawks and knives carried in a leather belt. When the paroled prisoners of Hull's army appeared off Cleveland, two companies of militia met them at the shore. The Clevelanders mustered about fifty men, "each being uniformed in his citizen's suit, and armed with his own rifle or shotgun, whatever the make."⁹ A Warren County history describes their militia uniforms as consisting of light indigo blue hunting frocks, a leather belt with an ax and

knife tucked in, a shot pouch, a powder horn, and a rifle.”¹⁰ Contemporary accounts note that the Ohio and Kentucky militia were dressed in woolen frocks of a grey color.¹¹

Other Warren County men were attired with “all its men, officers and privates dressed exactly alike. The uniform would consist of unbleached tow-linen hunting shirts and trousers of the same material. Around the waist was a leather girdle in which was carried a good-sized tomahawk and a butcher-knife. The firearm was a musket with a bayonet. The knapsack was of linen, painted and varnished. The arms accouterments, and knapsack would weigh about thirty or thirty-five pounds.”¹²

A description from Logan County describes a similar outfit. “The uniform of the company consisted of a black hunting shirt, trimmed or fringed with white all round the body, made as a loose coat or wrapper reaching a little above the knees, and open in front and fringed, then a large circular cape, with collar, fastening all together at the neck. [The fringe] were usually made of home-made linen about one and one-half inches wide, and sewing it on the garment and then raveling it out about half the width. Then a stout leather belt with a large buckle in front or some have a white belt, white pants and stockings. The hat was like one now in fashion, high crown with narrow rim. Each man had a white plume fastened to the left side ... of his hat. The feather was made by skillfully adjusting the white feathers of a goose around a rattan or a stick long enough to reach the top of the hat, carefully and firmly wrapping them with thread, and on the top was a tuft of read feathers, a bit of scarlet cloth, or the scalp of a red-headed wood-pecker.”¹³

In Ross County, members of Captain Phillip McNemere’s rifle company marched to the relief of Fort Wayne armed with “their own rifle, and each had a tomahawk and a large knife attached to their belts; was uniformed with blue linsey pants and hunting shirts.”¹⁴ Other volunteers from Ross County reported for duty wearing “broadcloth, homespun, or buckskin, as the case may be. Each private had a musket, a fusee, or a rifle, a knapsack and blanket, two square flints, and a pouch with twenty-four cartridges or twenty-four rifle balls and a quarter pound of powder.”¹⁵

Militia men from Montgomery County wore “tow linen hunting shirts and breeches, [and] low crowned hats with cockades or plates worn on the side. The arms were flintlock muskets, with bayonets; some mounted companies using, in addition, the old, heavy flintlock horse pistols that were fifteen to twenty inches long. To the waist belt in a leather pocket, hung the tomahawk, and in a sheath was a butcher knife. On the right hip, attached to a cross belt, thrown over the left shoulder, was a cartridge box. In a small sheath on the left side hung the bayonet. They were also supplied with canteens. The knapsack was made of heavy linen, painted and varnished. The blanket was rolled on top and the whole covered with a piece of oilcloth. Clothing, rations, and ammunition were carried in the knapsack.”¹⁶

The uniform of the rank and file from Green County wore “the regular everyday dress of the pioneer consisting of a tow linen shirt, buckskin breeches with a blue linsey hunting shirt secured with a leather belt and buckle, and a wool hat.”¹⁷

When the Washingtonian Yellow Jacket Riflemen of Coshocton County marched out to defend the Mansfield frontier under Captain Adam Johnson, they wore “new yellow hunting shirts, trimmed with white fringe, and each carried his trusty rifle and knapsack slung over his shoulder [with] tomahawk and scalping knife ... The belt, which was always tied behind, answered several purposes besides that of holding the dress together. In cold weather, the mittens and sometimes the bullet bag, occupied the front part of it. To the right side was suspended the tomahawk and to the left the scalping knife in its leathern sheath.”¹⁸

In Seneca County, “the large number were in homespun colored with bark. It was both convenient and usual to pull the tops [of the boots] over the pants and wear linsey-woolsey wammuses, the corners tied into a knot in front. Some had fur caps on, others straw hats or slouch hats; no two were dressed alike.”¹⁹

The Fairfield County militia responded to Governor Meigs’ summons wearing “the ordinary hunting shirt of the times, and a fur cap. The men were armed with a rifle gun, usually of large bore and long range. The hunting shirts were gotten up with considerable care and made quite a knobby (noble?) dress. As a military uniform, they were both picturesque and handsome.”²⁰

In Hamilton County, an observer described the militia as presenting a “motley appearance, dressed in a great variety of apparel, some with hunting shirts, some with butternut jackets, and others in more fantastic costumes. Many of the men had rifles or other arms, but most (...) with sticks and cornstalks in place of firelocks.”²¹

Thomas Pittenger, a volunteer soldier from Wayne County recalled that his unit “wore an ‘alenada’ yellow hunting shirt and any such underclothes as we could get. The members of my company were all armed with rifles. When the company was being armed, rifles were being seized wherever they could be found and taken whether the owner was willing or not. Pittenger wrote, “I carried mine all through the campaign, and after my discharge and arrival home, returned it to the neighbor from whom it was taken.”²²

The garrison for Camp Avery marched from Kinsman in Trumbull County armed with “common hunting rifles and bullet pouches, other old arms of former wars, and some, again, only pikes and hay rakes.”²³

Captain John Campbell’s rifle company from Portage County “had no uniform, very poor clothing, and very bad shoes, but every man managed to get a rifle, a tomahawk and a butcher knife.”²⁴ In his orders to him, Governor Meigs instructed Campbell to “appraise his arms and rifles so that in case of loss, the United States will pay for them” adding that “time did not permit sending arms from the arsenal in Kentucky.”²⁵ Campbell’s arms were appraised at \$912.66.

The Franklinton Riflemen, now modern day Columbus, “wore white breeches and a yellow cotton-cloth hunting shirt with white fringe; a leather belt around the waist,

carrying a hunting knife in a black scabbard in front, and in many instances a tomahawk behind. The plume in the hat was tall but rather stiff, being composed of white chicken feathers tied around a stick. Each man carried an old fashioned rifle with shot pouch and powder horn.”²⁶

Perhaps the most complete description comes from Samuel Williams who was a member of Captain Henry Brush’s Chillicothe militia company of 1812. Ordered to escort supplies to Hull’s army in Detroit, Williams wrote of his experiences several years later and detailed his unit’s dress, arms, and accouterments. “Every one, officers and men, were alike dressed in unbleached, tow-linen hunting shirts, and trowsers of the same material, with low crown hats, on the left side of which were worn black cockades about two inches in diameter, on the center of which were displayed small silver eagles about the size of a silver quarter-dollar. About the waist of each man was a stout leather girdle; in a leather pocket attached to this was slung behind a good sized tomahawk, and in a leather sheath, also attached to the girdle, hung a medium sized butcher knife. On the right hip, attached to a broad leather strap, thrown over the left shoulder hung the cartridge box, filled with ball-cartridges. On the left side, in a leather sheath, suspended to another broad leather strap, hung the bayonet. On the same side also hung a tin canteen, holding about a quart, suspended to a small leather strap over the right shoulder. The fire-arm was a United States musket, with bayonet, and a leather strap by which to sling the musket over the shoulder, for more convenient carrying when on the march. The knapsack was a heavy linen sack, painted and varnished, about sixteen inches wide, and of the same depth, with a flap on the under side, thrown over the mouth and tied by strings. To the upper and lower corner of each side was a strap through which to pass the arms. On the top was lashed the blanket, and over this a piece of oil-cloth to protect all from the rain. The knapsack was slung on the back, and the straps through which the arms were passed were tied by another across the breast.”²⁷

A contemporary newspaper account echoed Williams’ description. “The drums beat to arms for volunteers, and on Monday morning, there was a complete company of sixty volunteers, with hunting shirts, moccasins, tomahawks, scalping knives, muskets and bayonets, in fine order, and they really cut a martial appearance; the company elected their officers and the governor commissioned them.”²⁸

An itemized inventory of the personal effects of several Butler County militia men provides additional details concerning clothing and equipment. Their comrades sold the clothing and property of those who had deserted or died and turned the proceeds over to the families of the deceased. A list of the items and their value includes: blanket, \$2.50; pantaloons, \$1.15; shirt and pantaloons, \$2; hunting shirt, \$2; vest, 25 cents; hat, \$1.87; shoes, 75 cents; knapsack, 25 cents; mittens, 34 cents; flannel shirt, 25 cents; cup and spoon, 31 cents; fine comb, 18 cents; comb, 18 cents; roundabout, \$3.50; surtout coat, \$5; linen pantaloons, 25 cents; woolen pantaloons, \$1; belt and knife, 12 cents; overalls, 75 cents; handkerchief, 6 cents.²⁹

In at least one instance, uniformity came not from the clothing the men wore, but from their headgear. Captain Bond’s company of 30 men greeted General Hull’s army upon its

arrival at the Rapids of the Maumee (near Toledo) on their march to Detroit in June 1812. John E. Hunt described Bond's men as "uniformed by a round stovepipe hat with a buck's tail placed conspicuously in front."³⁰

A British officer at Frenchtown in 1813 described the militia of General Winchester's army as wearing knee length cotton frocks of various colors with worn hats and blankets wrapped around their waists. He added that this description was "applicable to the various hordes of irregular troops sent forth from the states of Ohio and Kentucky."³¹

Deserter descriptions, although not as detailed as those from the Revolutionary period, also describe militia clothing. John Williams, a deserter from Captain Asa Butler's company, wore a "whitish coat and linen pantaloons".³² Benjamin Reed, a substitute in Lieutenant William Russell's company had on "a pair of leather pantaloons and a grey surtout coat."³³ Three deserters from Captain Joel Collins Company in Urbana were all dressed alike in a brown hunting shirt with white fringe and brown pantaloons.³⁴

Officers' uniforms tended to reflect the styles and colors of their men's. "The want of uniform was visible among the officers, many of them being in civilian dress", recalled Allen Trimble.³⁵ Colonel James Denny of Pickaway County wrote home to his wife saying, "I wish to get me a hunting shirt of blue cotton fringed with white fringe."³⁶

Even though the Ohio militia acts required that officers furnish themselves with a sword or hanger to distinguish them from their soldiers, such was not always the case. Captain David Roop of Scioto County was "very un-officer like in his appearance. He could not be troubled with a sword, but carried the same arms and dressed in his linsey hunting shirt, the same as the men."³⁷ In Ross County, field grade officers carried pistols, hangers, or espointons or half pikes" as emblems of rank, while company grade officers trimmed their hunting shirts with red-colored fringe."³⁸

On an inspection tour of the North Western Army in the fall of 1812, General Harrison found the militia in summer clothes, unprepared for the upcoming winter weather. Harrison published a letter in newspapers throughout Ohio and Kentucky calling on the wealthier citizens to contribute articles of winter clothing. "Can any citizen sleep easy ... while the centinal [sic] who defends him stands in a Canadian climate, clad only in a linen hunting shirt?"³⁹ Harrison ordered 1800 shirts made from calico originally intended for distribution to local Indians.⁴⁰

Harrison also requested relief from the War Department asking that government-provided clothing be issued to his men. He wrote Secretary Eustis, "Many of the volunteers have left home entirely clad in linen and cotton."⁴¹ In reply, Eustis reminded Harrison that the militia received a clothing allowance equivalent to the cost of a private's uniform of the regular army, but acknowledged that the items were lacking and the men needed warm clothing. In response to a similar letter from Governor Snyder of Pennsylvania, Eustis noted, in October, ten thousand blankets, five thousand woolen jackets, five thousand pair of woolen pantaloons, twenty thousand pair of woolen stockings and socks, and twenty

thousand pair of shoes, with watch coats for centinals ... were delivered to the volunteers and militia (...) in need of clothing on the northwestern frontier.”⁴²

Captain Isaac Evans’ company from Coshocton County served from October 1812 to February 1813 and benefitted from Eustis’ decision. Evans’ company “marched to Franklinton, where they were mustered into service, furnished with uniforms and United States muskets.”⁴³

Despite these efforts, as late as December 1812, the Ohio militia lacked winter clothing. Brigadier General Benjamin Tupper wrote Governor Meigs describing the condition of his troops. “You will see many of them wading through the mud and snow almost barefooted and half naked. We have not more than five blankets to six men, not half of them have a change of pantaloons, etc., and those of linen (...) Five hundred Linen Pantaloons and Hunting Shirts would be of the utmost, if not the salvation of this little force.”⁴⁴ A few weeks later, Tupper reported to Meigs, “I yesterday distributed 200 Blankets – I received 30 to make Match coats for the Sentinals.”⁴⁵

To help alleviate the shortages, in December 1812, the Ohio legislature appropriated \$4,000 to provide blankets for the militia then in federal service. Two days later, on 24 December, the legislature amended the act to allow the purchase of “such articles of clothing as shall be most beneficial to the use of the militia.”⁴⁶ Division and brigade commanders, though, were quicker to address the supply shortages than the state legislators were. As early as August 1812, they had directed their men to report fully equipped for lengthy field duty and not rely upon the federal government for clothing.

At the end of the war, the Ohio Militia Act of 1815 addressed the question of uniformity by repeating the instructions of 1803: “each company of artillery, troop of horse, company of riflemen, light infantry, or grenadiers shall be uniformed as may be agreed upon by a majority of each company, which shall be worn by them on parade or in actual service.” Such legislation acknowledged the civilian-style nature of militia clothing and suggests that hunting shirts had been, and continued to be, the typical garb of the Ohio militia.

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- ⁵ Cass to Worthington, Camp near Urbana, 13 June 1812, Richard C. Knopf, ed. *Document Transcriptions of the War of 1812 in the Northwest: Thomas Worthington and the War of 1812 in the Northwest*, Vol. III. Anthony Wayne Parkway Board (Columbus: Ohio State Museum, 1957).
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- ⁷ R. C. Brown, comp. *The History of Hardin County, Ohio*. (Chicago: Warner Beers and Co., 1883), 309.
- ⁸ Augustus W. Drury, *History of the City of Dayton and Montgomery County*, (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1909), 721.
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- ⁴⁴ Tupper to Meigs, 8 December 1812, *Document Transcriptions*, Vol. II
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