

A Word About Longhunters

Longhunters were professional hide hunters. They lived in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, or Virginia during the mid-1700s, but hunted in present-day central and eastern Kentucky. Called Longhunters because they went on “long hunts” for months at a time, they lived off the land and hunted mainly white-tailed deer for their hides.

The Life of a Longhunter

Usually the hunting season began in April and ended in late fall. Longhunters came to hunt in Kentucky in two ways. Some traveled by foot or on horseback, following the overland trails that crossed the mountains at Cumberland Gap in southeastern Kentucky. Others traveled on flatboats, keelboats, bateaux, or dugout canoes down the Ohio River, then up the Kentucky River to their hunting areas.



Squire Boone, a Kentucky Longhunter.
maps.thefullwiki.org

For protection, Longhunters traveled in large groups and set up base camps. These groups split up into smaller groups to hunt deer. The life of a Longhunter was dangerous. He faced bad weather, rabid wolves, poisonous snakes, mosquitoes, ticks, disease, starvation, and frostbite.

Once a Longhunter killed a deer and removed its hide, he might butcher it and eat the meat. But more often, he left the carcasses to rot. Back in camp, the men scraped the hair, meat, and fat off the hides. Then they staked and stretched them to dry.

The prepared deer hides were now ready. The men tied them up in bundles of 50, and packed them out on horseback. Then they shipped them out on boats to market and traded them to American and European hide dealers. Longhunters took thousands of deer annually during the hide harvest. In 1767, the commissary at Fort Pitt took in over 200,000 deer hides. Businesses bought the hides and made them into clothing, shoes, book bindings, saddles, gloves, and horse harnesses.

During the years the Longhunters worked in Kentucky, the French and British were competing with each other for control of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. Due to this conflict, many Longhunters lost their entire season of hides to the French or their native allies, who helped themselves to the hides.

Native peoples also hunted deer, and they resented the Longhunters. These men came into Indian territories and killed the game native groups depended on for food, clothing, and many other things. There was fierce competition between the Longhunters and native groups: in hunting the deer and in trading the skins at the various trading posts, such as Fort Pitt. Native peoples also considered the Longhunters the advance guard of colonial settlement. If the Longhunters were in an area, the settlers could not be far behind.

How He Dressed

A Longhunter often dressed much like a Native American hunter. He wore breechclouts, deerskin leggings, a knee-length cotton or woolen shirt, and leather moccasins (there was no underwear then). Shirts doubled as a night shirt at bedtime.

He tied the leggings below his knee with hand-woven leg ties, or piece of leather thong to tighten them against his leg. The bottom of his leggings were generally tucked inside his moccasins. To keep insects, burrs, and brambles out of his shoes, he kept the cuff at the top of his moccasins rolled up and tied-off.



Over his shirt, he often wore a waistcoat or vest of wool or linen that reached mid-thigh. A fringed hunting shirt or frock made of deerskin or *linsey-woolsey*, a coarse fabric made from a combination of wool and linen, completed his outfit. He tied it all off with a colorful sash or a leather belt. His clothing was a brown or beige hue, since it was dyed with natural ingredients, such as butternut, black walnut hulls, and oak bark.



Hairstyle was a personal preference, but many Longhunters wore their hair long, tied in a ponytail in the back. Headgear consisted of felt hats with wide brims, tri-corner hats, or hats made from animal fur. Often a hunter tied a large handkerchief “pirate style” around his head.

A Longhunter was never without his flintlock rifle-gun or musket. A rifle had spiral grooves cut inside the barrel. These grooves caused the lead ball, when shot, to spin out of the end of the gun, creating greater accuracy. A musket had a smooth bore. This allowed the hunter to load his gun more quickly and easily, but the weapon wasn't as accurate. A Longhunter also carried a long-bladed knife and tomahawk. Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton are famous Kentucky Longhunters.

For further reading, we recommend *The Hunters of Kentucky: A Narrative History of America's First War West, 1750-1792*, by Ted Franklin Belue, published in 2003 by Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA.

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