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EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT MATERIALS

Excerpts from

Chapter 8 – Packing for the Wilderness (pages 97-133) in
Boonesborough Unearthed - Frontier Archaeology at a Revolutionary Fort
by Nancy O'Malley
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This selection from O'Malley's book, *Boonesborough Unearthed - Frontier Archaeology at a Revolutionary Fort* discusses the role clothing played on the Kentucky frontier, men's and women's clothing, textile fiber production from flax and wool, how clothing was made, and the tools and items women used in clothing manufacture that have been recovered from archaeological sites – in this case Fort Boonesborough.

About Clothing

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Settlers needed to bring clothing; bed linens; tools for agriculture; equipment for food processing, cooking, and serving; implements for sewing, spinning, and weaving; tools for constructing a cabin or other buildings and furniture; seed for crops; and weapons and ammunition...

...Many items could be fabricated when settlers reached their destination, particularly items made from wood or other natural resources. Examples include deer and buffalo skins tanned for leather, cane and reeds used for basketry, buffalo hair woven with flax or wool to produce linsey-woolsey, and wood turned to form bowls, trenchers, and other serving vessels and utensils.

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...Beyond the practical considerations of clothing choices (such as warmth and durability) was the social statement that clothing made. People often assessed social status or position using clothing cues. Historian Elizabeth Perkins perceptively observes, "Personal appearance, especially clothing, played an important

role in the rapid appraisal of strangers.... Those passing the test of dress and manner...could expect preferential treatment.... Reading the language of dress became part of the social expertise of every border inhabitant." Dress and appearance also reflected ethnic and cultural backgrounds.[1]

The concept of dress and undress is a useful way to think about colonial clothing. Dress refers to the total look conveyed by a combination of garments. Undress refers to everyday, utilitarian clothes used for work and usually involves fewer garments. Since laundering clothing was an arduous task, reducing wear and tear on clothing encouraged wearing a minimum unless conditions called for more formal attire. Adding or subtracting specific garments depended on factors such as weather, the formality of the occasion, one's social class, and the task at hand. Women living on isolated stations might only wear a shift in warm weather, particularly if they did not expect to be seen by outsiders. Likewise, men might just wear a pair of breeches and a shirt, adding leggings if they thought they would need leg protection....

Men's Clothing

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Late eighteenth-century clothing for men on the frontier is often stereotyped as being made of buckskin in the form of hunting shirts, breeches, and leggings. Joseph Doddridge's memoir described the hunting shirt as the universal dress of men, worn with breeches and/or leggings. The hunting shirt was a "loose frock, reaching halfway down the thighs, with large sleeves, open before, and so wide as to lap over a foot or more then belted. The cape was large, and sometimes handsomely fringed with a ravelled piece of cloth of a different color from that of the hunting shirt itself." This garment may have had buttons only at the sleeve cuffs since it was held closed by a belt. Knee- or full-length breeches were made with a drop front that fastened to the waist with metal buttons usually made of brass (sometimes gilded) or yellow metal alloy. Leggings were simply rectangles made of leather or cloth that laced around the leg. They protected the lower legs but could be made long enough to cover the thigh as well.[2]

In reality, clothing choices were more varied than the stereotype implies. While leather was very durable and protective, cloth garments were much more comfortable and were preferred over leather. Probate inventories that include a list of clothing are good sources of information on wardrobe choice and variety. William Stewart's inventory,

recorded in the Lincoln County Court on March 19, 1783, listed his clothing in detail. A pair of drawers was the only undergarment listed. He owned two pairs of breeches (one made of leather) and four linen shirts over which he could choose among three waistcoats. Protective clothing included a pair of overalls and a pair of cloth leggings. He owned four stocks to wear at his neck, a handkerchief, eight pairs of stockings, a pair of half-hand gloves, a pair of silver knee buckles, and a watch. For footwear, he had his choice of two pairs of shoes and a pair of "shoe boots" but no moccasins. A greatcoat kept him warm.[3]

James Wright's inventory, filed a month earlier [in February 1783], revealed a smaller wardrobe but showed similar variety. His coat, cloak, and two jackets were all described as old, as were his shoes and stockings and his two hats. But he followed the styles of the day in his suit of cotton and linen, a precursor to the modern three-piece suit, to be worn with his shirts and socks. A pair of buckles adorned his shoes. He also had spare buttons, some fulled cloth

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(a type of felt), and some silk for future garments. Noteworthy for their absence were moccasins and hunting shirts. Like William Stewart and many others, Wright preferred English-style clothing.[4]

Women's Clothing

Women's clothing began with a shift, usually made of linen, that had either a drawstring or a plain neck and drawstring or cuffs at the elbows. Women also wore stays, the precursor of a foundation garment that was later called a corset. Stays were most often worn by the middling and gentry classes. Working women and slave women also wore stays but more often for support than to produce a fashionable body shape. Stays varied considerably in the materials used to construct them, in the flexibility of their boning, and in the fabric that covered them. They were laced to the body and so did not require metal fasteners.[5]

Basic outerwear was a linsey petticoat (skirt) and a gown. The gown took several forms; the front could be open or closed, and the back was either a sacque (with loose fabric gathered in the back in pleats) or English style. The bodice and skirt were joined together and usually fastened across the front with hooks and eyes. The skirt was open at the front below the waistline, and the petticoat worn beneath was revealed in this open

space. The petticoat was a skirt and was not considered an undergarment. It could have a waistband that fastened with a button or ties, or it could be fitted around the waist with a drawstring. Several styles of loosely fitting gowns were also common informal or working wear for women. Other articles of clothing or accessories included a stomacher (a triangular piece of fabric used to hold the front of the gown together), a jacket or cape in colder weather, a mobcap (sometimes worn with a hat), mitts or a muff, and heeled shoes.[6]

Textile Production

Textile production was one of the most time-consuming and labor-intensive tasks done by colonial settlers on the frontier. Growing and harvesting flax and hemp, shearing sheep, tanning leather - these were just the beginning steps of a long process that occupied many hours of labor. Linen, wool, and cotton were all common fabrics used for colonial clothing. Frontier life was hard on clothing, and replacing garments was often difficult. Women spent a significant amount of their time spinning and weaving linen and wool, then sewing the cloth into clothing. But other fibers were also used, specifically buffalo hair combined with linen to form a variant of linsey-woolsey, and even nettles, which were collected and processed into fiber. Settler Mrs. Morrison mentioned that some women used nettle thread as a warp and buffalo hair for the weft as a stopgap solution to shortages

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of more desirable fibers. Flax cultivation was important for the production of linen. Likewise, hemp fiber could be woven into a durable, utilitarian cloth that was good for work clothes. Cotton did not grow well in Kentucky's latitude and saw less use than other fabrics that could be produced from locally available domesticated or wild plants and animals. Sheep were more difficult to raise than other livestock because they were vulnerable to predators such as wolves and required more shelter than cattle or pigs. Nevertheless, sheep were introduced at least by the mid- to late 1780s and probably earlier in small numbers. Sheared wool could also be brought in as packing material and then spun and woven into fabric.[7]

Linen Production

One of the first nonfood crops grown was flax for linen [archaeological evidence of flaxseed was identified in the midden soil associated with the kitchen in John

Luttrell's cabin at Fort Boonesborough]. Flax tends to be a spring crop because the fiber cannot endure very hot weather. The leaves wilt, the stems turn yellow, and the seeds turn brown when it is time to harvest. The entire plant, roots and all, is pulled from the ground, since cutting the plant causes it to lose its sap which affects the quality of the linen. Once the settlers harvested flax, the fiber had to be separated from the woody stalks. First, a process called rippling used coarse iron wire combs to strip the seeds and leaves from the plant. Next, the stalks were retted to loosen the pectin or gum that attaches the fiber to the stem. Retting was accomplished by either submerging the stalks in water or spreading them on the ground and allowing dew to loosen the adhesion of the bark to the fiber. After retting, the plants were squeezed and allowed to dry before they were broken on a flax break. A flax break chopped away at the straw or chaff, freeing the fiber. More chaff was removed with a scutching knife and board, and then the fiber was drawn through hackles (boards with protruding nails) to comb and straighten the longer fibers prior to spinning. This process also separated the shorter fibers used for tow, or coarse linen, from the finer, longer strands that resemble masses of blonde hair and make the finest linen. Only after this labor-intensive process is completed is the flax ready to be spun into thread and woven into cloth used for garments and bed and table linens.[8]

Wool Production

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Although sheep were present only in small numbers in the earliest years of settlement, their wool was valued for making a durable, warm fabric. Wool was produced by a less arduous process than linen but still entailed intensive labor. Once the sheep was sheared, the raw wool was scoured by washing, rinsing, and drying to remove dirt, grease, and sweat. Fuller's earth, a fine clay powder, was often used to remove lanolin, a natural grease found in sheep's wool. Once cleaned, the fleece was dyed using various natural products like indigo, madder, cochineal, goldenrod, and pokeberry. The fleece was then carded using carding combs set with wire teeth; carding straightened the fibers and removed any remaining matter that scouring left behind.

Note: Although natural sources of Fuller's earth occur in western Kentucky, supplies probably had to be brought into central Kentucky in the late eighteenth century.[9]

Carded wool was then ready for spinning into fabric suitable for knitwear or bulkier items like carpeting. Another combing process removed the shorter fibers to make worsted cloth suitable for garments. The spinning wheel twisted the fibers into a long continuous thread or yarn. The yard was then woven on a loom to produce wool fabrics, or it was knitted. Wool was fulled by trampling the cloth in a tub of warm, soapy water, a process that shrank the wool and locked the woven fibers closer together. The cloth was then stretched on tenter frames and allowed to dry. All of these processes were eventually mechanized, but the early settlers of Kentucky had no choice but to process the products by hand until conditions allowed them to build fulling mills and other facilities that employed machines to automate the process. Unsurprisingly, peddlers bringing in goods to sell and early storekeepers on the Kentucky frontier stocked fabrics as one of their major commodities. But tens of thousands of yards of wool and other cloth were produced at home by Kentucky women from homegrown raw materials.[10]

Clothing Construction

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Once the fabric…production processes were complete, clothing construction could begin. Sewing equipment is often recovered during archaeological excavation since the tools are usually made of metal. The [Boonesborough] fort excavations yielded a pair of large shears (missing one of its loop handles) suitable for cutting fabric pattern pieces, and a blade of a smaller pair of scissors that would have been useful for snipping thread, trimming seams, or other routine sewing tasks.... Both the scissors and shears were made of iron and had pivoted blades. Two thimbles…were also found. Both are made of brass and were probably manufactured in England. The complete child's thimble has dents in the crown or top that indicate heavy use. Thimbles to protect fingers from needle or pinpricks during hand sewing were a common component of every woman's sewing box. Little girls were taught to sew at an early age. Five straight pins with wound wire heads could have been used to hold fabric pieces together to facilitate sewing a seam or, alternatively, to pin a neckerchief or apron pinafore in place. Straight pins were often used to attach parts of women's garments to each other. Other uses for straight pins included pinning multiple pages of a document together, functioning as guides for making lace, and, in a departure from practical uses, used in conjuring or deflecting magic spells.[11]

While the textiles used to construct clothing rarely survive in archaeological deposits, fasteners such as buttons and buckles are frequently collected at archaeological excavations. Commercially marketed buttons were commonly made from metal but also were produced from horn, wood, and shell. Buttons recovered from the [Fort Boonesborough] excavations are of several sizes and made of a variety of metals. All five pewter buttons recovered at the Boonesborough excavation....may have been sown to sleeve cuffs or the

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placket of a waistcoat. Pewter is a tin alloy to which copper and antimony are added to produce a stronger metal. It is light in color and has a relatively low melting point that allows it to be easily cast in a mold. Owning a button mold meant that buttons could be manufactured at home to replace lost or broken ones. One of the buttons recovered was cast in a mold that formed a wedge-shaped shank that was then drilled for sewing.... It also has a molded design on its face. The design is difficult to identify but might be a face, possibly in profile, surrounded by a decorative border. Its present indirectly suggests that someone at Fort Boonesborough owned a button

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mold.... The other buttons had plain faces. Plain-faced buttons are the most common type in use during the late eighteenth century, primarily on men's garments. By the time Fort Boonesborough was established, pewter buttons were worn primarily by people of limited means.[12]

Notes

1. Elizabeth A. Perkins, *Border Life: Experience and Memory in the Revolutionary Ohio Valley*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, pages 85-88, 1998.

2. Joseph Doddridge, *Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania, from 1763 to 1783, Inclusive*. Joel Munsell, Albany, NY, page 140, 1876.

3. Clerk of Court, Lincoln County Will Book A, pages 13-14, Stanford, KY.

4. Clerk of Court, Lincoln County Will Book A, pages 20-21, Stanford, KY.

5. “A Colonial Lady’s Clothing: A Glossary of Terms.” Colonial Williamsburg website: [www.history.org/history/clothing/women/wglossary.cfm]. Linda Baumgarten, “Looking at Eighteenth-century Clothing,” Colonial Williamsburg website: [www.history.or/history/clothing/intro/clothing.cfm].

6. Kathleen A. Staples and Madelyn Shaw, *Clothing Through American History*. Greenwood, Santa Clara, CA, pages 269-280, 2013.

7. Interview with Mrs. Morrison, Draper Manuscript 11CC152, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

8. Alice Morse Earle, *Home Life in Colonial Days*. Brookshire Traveler Press, reprint, Stockbridge, MA, pages 168-172, 1974.

9. John W. Hosterman and Sam H. Patterson, *Bentonite and Fuller’s Earth Resources of the United States*, US Geological Survey Professional Paper 1522. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., page 26, 1992.

10. Alice Morse Earle, *Home Life in Colonial Days*. Brookshire Traveler Press, reprint, Stockbridge, MA, pages 193-202, 1974.

11. Mary Beaudry, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, page 8, page 96, 2006.

12. Stanley J. Olsen, “Dating Early Plain Buttons by Their Form,” *American Antiquity* 28 (No. 4), pages 551-554, 1963; Carolyn L. White, *American Artifacts of Personal Adornment, 1680-1820: A Guide to Identification and Interpretation*. Altamira Press, Lanham, MD, page 57, page 64, 2005.