

CLOTHING IN LOYALIST TIMES

by Margaret Carter UE

The kind of clothing that was worn at the time of the American Revolution was very different from that worn today. Other things were also very different. You couldn't go to a store and buy an article of clothing. There were no patterns that you could buy at a store either. When people needed a new piece of clothing, a pattern had to be cut specifically for them. In many cases if it were to be made of wool, first the sheep would have been sheared, the wool carded, then spun, then woven on a loom to make the cloth. There were single loop-stitch sewing machines – the first English patent for a complete machine for sewing was issued in 1790. Mass production of sewing machines did not begin until the mid 1850's. This meant that the sewing of clothing was almost all done by hand. How many of you can sew? knit? For clothes made of linen it was much the same story. The flax was grown in the fields, harvested, spun and then woven into cloth. Silk could be purchased at a store but it was extremely expensive and only the very wealthy could afford to wear silk clothing.

Underwear too, was very different then. When a girl or woman started to dress, she first put on a shift. Then came the stays or corsets. In fact small babies were put into stays to ensure that their backs stayed straight. These were laced up the back. The next layer was a bodice. This was followed by a petticoat or two, or perhaps even three. Some petticoats were quilted for extra warmth. Pockets tied around the waist with a cord were worn outside if the girl was single. Once she was married it was kept where no one could see it. The nursery rhyme "Lucy Locket lost her pocket" made no sense until I found out that this was the way pockets were worn in the 18th century.

Hair styles were strange compared with today's. Women changed their shape by piling their hair up, sometimes to a height of three feet. They then decorated them with things like birds and lace, feathers and ribbons. Their hats had to be worn with a great forward slant so they would stay on with ribbons tied at the back. The most popular one was the shepherdess or gypsy hat. Mob caps were worn under them but also alone. If hair was only washed about once a year, it was a good thing that they pretty well kept it covered.



Baths were pretty infrequent as they thought that bathing was unhealthy as it washed away one's oils in the skin. There were no deodorants but sometimes a little lavender was worn to make a person smell a little sweeter. Lead compounds, which we now know leads to lead-poisoning was used in cosmetics. Teeth were brushed with several things that ate away all of their enamel. Aren't you happy that we live today?

You may all have heard the story of Little Red Riding Hood – most capes were red wool although some were made of blue material.

Shoes were made the same for both feet. There were several different kinds of boots and shoes. Stockings were seamed up the back and depending upon a man's station in life made of different material. The wealthy wore silk stockings while the less fortunate wore coarse linen or heavy knitted woollen ones.

Men's trousers were breeches that fitted very closely over the knees until pretty well the end of the 18th century. A man was almost never seen without his waist coat - not to have it on was considered to be undressed. These were a man's most elaborate article of clothing and were made of silk, cotton, wool, or linen, and could be adorned with embroidery, tassels, silver and gold lace. Their coats were skirted and flared. There were buttons up the front that were sometimes buttoned and sometimes not. It was not until the end of the 18th century that the great coat began to come into fashion. Before that it was the cloak, again often red, even for a man.

Some men wore wigs or perukes that were powdered white. They were made of human, horse, or goat hair in many styles – hair tied at the back of the neck - not quite a pony-tail – but almost! The hats were called cocked hats as they were folded to be carried under the man's arm. The tricorne hat was not called that until after it had gone out of style in the next century. It wasn't until the 17th century that standing armies had been established and a beginning was made toward uniforms. The custom of dressing one army to distinguish it from another was begun during the first half of the 18th century. As early as 1645 the British regulars were wearing red coats. Regiments within the same army were distinguished by their coat facings, companies by minor trimmings and officers by insignia of their rank – especially their hat cockade. A cockade is a rosette.



The armies at the time of the American Revolution wore whatever they could manage to find for as the war continued cloth became more and more difficult to find. Those regiments loyal to the King or Loyalists wore green.

Do you know what a spatterdash was? This was an article that went over the boot and part way up to the knee to protect the soldier's legs from bushes while on the march, and to keep twigs and stone from getting into his shoe or boots.

We cannot forget about the children. Both sexes were dressed in similar clothing until they were toilet trained. A boy did not get his first breeches until he was about five or six. All of the children were then dressed as little adults.

There are so many good stories written about Loyalist times, but please be thankful that you live today – hot and cold running water, indoor plumbing, comfortable beds, food easily available, clothing to fit at stores close-by, automobiles with heat, antibiotics, immunization, airplanes for fast travel. Can you name other things that we can be thankful for today?