

So You Want To Be In The SAR Color Guard

By Dan Hopping, VP Raleigh Chapter, NCSSAR

The Color Guard is the face of the SAR to most people. It is our advertisement, our public brand as it were. It is the most public way that we honor our ancestors. It's also a lot of fun.



We march in processions and lay wreaths at Revolutionary War events and battle fields. We lay wreaths and fire volleys at the Raleigh National Cemetery on Memorial Day. We march in the Veterans Day Parade. We have a booth at the Bennett Place State Historic Site on Memorial Day when we educate the public and fire volleys on the hour. We perform the opening ceremonies at dinners, museums and historical events. We have a booth and some of us are docents at the NC Museum of History. You don't have to be in all the events. You can pick and chose what you have time for.

You also don't have to have a fancy uniform to participate. You can use a blue blazer, slacks, shirt and tie and participate in almost all the events. Many people chose to obtain colonial civilian dress or a Revolutionary War uniform, they are not as expensive as you might expect.

If you are in the SAR you have an ancestor who was involved in the war so why not recreate his dress or uniform. If you recreate his civilian dress it is easy. Accurate information abounds on the Web and in books. If you want to recreate your ancestor's uniform, you will need to do a little research. What unit was he in and in what state did he serve? Also what time period in the war did he serve? The uniforms changed dramatically during the eight years of the war. If your ancestor was in the militia, your choices are simple and inexpensive. If your ancestor was in the Continental Line, everything depends on the regiment, state and time frame in which he served.

There is a great deal of information on-line and in books. Of course we will help you with the details to make it easy. We will also provide you with the details of where to buy the uniform and accouterments to keep the cost down. The companies that sell uniforms and accouterments are called sutlers and they usually are on hand with their goods at Revolutionary

War events such as the Guilford Courthouse battle reenactment and the Southeast Primitive Rendezvous (Oct 19 to 26 in Near Yadkinville, NC).

We recommend that you take enough time to obtain as authentic an outfit as possible. You will be proud of an authentic uniform and will be welcome at every historical event. You will also learn a great deal about your ancestor in the process.

We should advise you of a controversy about the color guards of heritage societies. Historians and re-enactors despair of our "Polyester Generals" and complain that the heritage societies such as the SAR has many orders of magnitude more generals than Washington, France and England together ever had in the entire war. Remember that over 90% of the soldiers were privates. If your ancestor was an officer or if you were a officer in the service of the US – great, recreate that uniform. Also, remember that polyester or gabardine did not exist in the 1700s. You should try to use cloth similar to what they would have used. The NSSAR has a great "*Color Guard Handbook*" available for download from this site.

<http://www.sar.org/sites/default/files/nssar-color-guard-handbook-2011-07-10.pdf>

The Handbook has a great deal of useful information and clearly states that polyester is OK for our ceremonial purposes.

"Due to the time and expense of obtaining an uniform made from natural and more authentic material, many color guard members chose to obtain a less expensive uniform made from modern fabric, most often polyester or gabardine. These uniforms made from modern fabric are perfectly acceptable for all events except for those where the guardsman will fire a musket. For safety reasons, the SAR does not allow guardsmen in modern fabric uniforms to fire a weapon due the danger of melting fabric causing severe burns."

The NCSSAR also has a "*Standing Operational Procedure for Color Guard*" downloadable from:

<http://www.ncssar.com/NCSSAR%20Color%20Guard%20SOP.pdf>

Very accurate and authentic uniforms may be purchased from many suttlers over the Internet after entering your measurements on line. You can buy 'off the rack' uniforms from suttlers like GG Godwin or you can buy custom made uniforms from a number of sutlers. You can also buy the patterns and have the items made. Buying a pattern and having it made is by far the least costly way to get a quality uniform.

Let's start with the decisions you might want to make.

Blazer verses civilian verses military uniform

Blazer: Most people already have a blue blazer, grey slacks and a shirt and tie. This is easy, just show up and participate with us. We would love to have you there.

Civilian: There are a number of sutlers who provide the normal clothes of the colonial period and colonial dress is appropriate for almost all occasions. This works very well for docents and living history educators. The cost of an authentic civilian outfit will generally be from \$300 to \$500 if you buy it and just the cost of the cloth if you make it. (Of course for most of us we would have to be real nice to someone who has talent and a sewing machine).

Uniform: Being in a Revolutionary War uniform is a lot of fun and is always in demand. You can buy it from \$400 to \$800. So, which type of uniform would you like? You have a lot of choices and we will help you with the decision process whether you are just learning about the Revolutionary War or whether you are upgrading you uniform and want to make it more authentic.

Continental line verses militia uniform



Continental: The continental line uniform looks real sharp and everyone will understand what you represent. It is appropriate for all processions, ceremonies, parades and most wreath laying ceremonies. The continental uniform is not appropriate for recreating many of the southern soldiers and their battles (such as Kings Mountain) which were fought by militia. The continental uniform can be hot in the summer and the tri-corner hat collects water in the rain and then pours it out when you bow your head in prayer. The continental uniform consists of coat, waistcoat, shirt, stock (precursor to the tie), britches and long socks or trousers, shoes or boots and lastly a tri-corner hat. If you are representing an officer then you would need a sash, spontoon and sword. The officer's coat would have shiny buttons and one or two silver or gold epaulets. The shirt would have ruffles at the cuff and neck. The non-commissioned officer's coat would have red or green epaulets or cloth strips on the shoulder.

Militia: The militia uniform is the most representative of the Southern battles and is appropriate in all NC events. It is the most comfortable and least expensive. You add layers underneath in the winter and wear just a cotton shirt under the breathable frock coat in the summer. The basic militia uniform is what the average farmer or merchant person wore year round. The frock coat or hunting shirt was as common then as baseball caps are now. The frock coat was the standard uniform of the first two years of the war and was the field coat for the entire war. The Eastern NC militia might have worn the frock coat or the normal waistcoat, shirt, breeches and socks they wore every day. The Western NC militia would have worn the frock coat. The most common militia uniform consists of a round hat turned up on the left, frock coat (also called a hunting shirt) shirt trousers, gaiters or spaterdashers, wide belt and shoes.

Lieutenant Lefferts¹ wrote:

"The rifle dress or hunting frock was preferred by Washington, and was worn by most of the army throughout the war. It was the field dress of almost the entire army. The hunting shirt was made of deer leather, linen, or homespun, dyed in various colors, in the different regiments, such as tan, green, blue, yellow, purple, black or white. They were all of the same pattern, but some had capes and cuffs of different colors. With the hunting shirts were worn long leggings or overalls, also preferred by Washington in place of breeches and stockings. They were made of linen or duck undyed, or of deer leather, and later in the war were furnished at the ankle with four buttons and a strap under the shoe."

¹ "Uniforms of the 1775 – 1783 American, British, French and German armies in the War of the American Revolution" by Lt. Charles M. Lefferts, Published by WE Inc., Old Greenwich, CN Page 11

Recreate your ancestor's uniform or obtain a generic uniform?

Generic Uniform: You can purchase the classic Continental uniform 'off the rack' at several sutlers. This is the blue coat with buff or red facings (\$295) with knee britches and socks or trousers. Just pick a state uniform to recreate and go for it. I was lucky; I am the same size as the average department store window dummy and could buy a standard coat without having to have it altered.

Recreate your ancestor's uniform: Do the research and find out what he would have worn. The information is online and in many books. This can consist of modifying the generic to include the unit and time frame or adding an ethnic background to the uniform. If your ancestor was Scottish you might change the round militia hat for the Scottish bonnet in your clan plaid and change your accouterments to the Scottish dirk, claymore and sporran. If your ancestor was Hessian you will change to the Hessian helmet and coat. Sometimes this is simple, just change the coat to be the right state. If your ancestor was Massachusetts, you will need to have a light blue coat with white facings. If your ancestor was cavalry or artillery you will need a very different coat, hat and boots. A custom coat will cost more like \$495.

Accouterments

Continental: The continental soldier carried a musket and bayonet. The most common model carried by both sides throughout the Revolutionary war was the .75 caliber Short Land Pattern Musket commonly referred to by the nickname 'Brown Bess'.



There were also many locally made muskets that were relatively close copies. The Brown Bess Firelock was the standard weapon of the British army from about 1710 to 1839. It had several models over time that differed primarily in the barrel length. A little later in the war the Charleville .69 caliber Musket was imported from France. Charleville is a town about 65 miles east of Paris which had a large arms manufacturing plant. The Charleville firelock was easier to clean and being of a slightly smaller caliber, allowed the soldier to carry more ammunition. Supporting accouterments are the bayonet, cartridge box, haversack and canteen.

Militia: Early in the war, the militia carried whatever the soldier used at home. In the east, this was often a fowling piece used to put dinner on the table. This smoothbore could use small pellets for birds and rabbits or a single ball for deer. In the backcountry of Pennsylvania, Virginia and the Carolinas, the long rifle was popular for deer, turkey and defense. The long rifle was made by gunsmiths in almost every county. The counties around Philadelphia were famous worldwide for their gunsmiths who made rifles of graceful design and superb accuracy. These Pennsylvania Long rifles were often made for use in the wilds of Kentucky.



Hence they are interchangeably called Kentucky long rifles or Pennsylvania long rifles. The accouterments of the militia soldier are a long rifle or musket, possible bag, powder horn, tomahawk, wooden canteen and haversack.

The Revolutionary War uniforms evolved significantly over the eight years of the conflict. Here are some snapshots of the dress of the war.

April 19, 1775 Lexington and Concord

The Minute Men wore what they always wore day to day. When called out, they grabbed their firelock and rushed to the muster point.

Washington's General Order of July 24, 1776

Washington recommended hunting shirts as part of the clothing bounty to be provided by the Continental Congress. He considered it the most practical garment for troops. In his July 1776 General order, he wrote:

"No dress can be cheaper, nor more convenient, as the wearer may be cool in warm weather and warm in cool weather by putting on under cloaths which will not change the outward dress, Winter or Summer – Besides which it is a dress justly supposed to carry no small terror to the enemy, who think every such person a complete marksman."

Washington's General Order of October 2, 1779

This order set the standard for the "classic" Revolutionary War uniform that the modern observer recognizes. It fixed blue as the color for all forces in the Continental line.

Blue coat with white facings

New Hampshire
Massachusetts
Rhode Island
Connecticut

Blue coat with buff facings

New York
New Jersey

Blue Coat with red facings.

Pennsylvania
Delaware
Maryland
Virginia

(This was also the primary uniform of the colonial troops in the French and Indian Wars.)

Blue coat with Blue facings and buttonholes edged with narrow white tape

North Carolina
South Carolina
Georgia

*These are from the Varick transcripts of Washington's
General Order of October 2, 1779, Library of Congress*

Regardless of the general orders, there was considerable diversity of uniform styles in the various states and regiments based on what material was available at the time. While it is very dramatic for a Color Guard to be in matching uniforms, diversity represents the reality of the War.

Future articles will provide choices for acquiring these uniforms and accouterments along with sources.