

Costume Tips BOYS

Mid 18th century clothing: basics for beginners

How to choose and assemble a basic clothing kit for men

I will focus on the mid-18th century, common man attire. Once again, with the consideration that we are in a French occupied fort, I will try to give you the period correct description and how it was created, then give you an “acceptable” modern equivalent.

Essential, basic clothing items are:

Shirt, Breeches, Breechclout, Leggings, Headgear and Accessories to add later

The Shirt- The men’s shirt was the equivalent to the woman’s chemise. It is the basic undergarment and is all purpose clothing. It is t-shaped with set in long sleeves that are rather full and have cuffs. There is a basic collar and it has a slit at center front. It closes at the neck with a tie or button. Length is mid thigh with side vents. Seams were flat felled for durability. Men’s shirts have changed little over time except for details on collar height, sleeve fullness and fasteners. Predominantly white linen. Less common to be found in cotton, fustian or hemp. Voyagers brought “Trade goods” for native peoples and these goods became integrated into everyday wear as trade shirts. Bright colors, stripes and calimanco weaves. Some printed indienne cottons/linens. White muslin is acceptable substitute. As well as solid colors and stripes in appropriate colors. Woven checks could be used as well. Study your textiles before purchasing print shirts.

Breeches- Every man and boy over age 5 wore breeches. They have a fitted waist, button fly and come to just below the knee, and have a fitted knee band closure. Fall front style comes in to vogue around 1760’s and 1770’s. Breeches are commonly found in wool, less common in linen, cotton and hemp. Silk breeches were for the wealthy. Trousers were not common until very late 18thC/ early 19th century. Most breeches you find ready made today at vendors are of canvas. This is an “o.k.” substitute. Heavy linen or fustian would be better, they feel better and are more comfortable.

Slops are acceptable working attire and are historically noted by 1st person accounts to be “common” attire for the workingman or for any dirty job. They are a loose version of the breeches out of lighter weight fabric and lacking the fitted knee band. Closing instead with a tie below the knee, if any closure is wanted. These could be worn alone, or over your breeches. Both slops and breeches should have been worn with stockings and shoes, if you weren’t barefoot. Stockings would be thigh high and be gartered below the knee. Shoes are leather and have a low square heel, closed toe and preferably have a buckle type of closure.

Breechclout- Canadiens traveling for the fur trade adopted the breechclout of the natives early on to replace the cumbersome breeches. A simple long and narrow rectangle of wool draped between the legs and held at waist with a belt or leather thong. Also worn around home during the summer. The shirt being quite long would have covered the ‘clout completely. Not every man wore these, and not everyman should today. Wool, lined in the crotch is your best modern equivalent.

Leggings- Another piece of clothing adopted by the Canadians to complement the breechclout was the soft wool leggings called “mitasses”. They are held below the knee with garters and are tied to the belt or leather thong that supports the ‘clout. These looked like gaiters with out the buttons.

What to put on your head- Headgear of the male habitante of New France was historically noted to be the Tuque. This is a knitted hat that is cocoon shaped. One end pushed inside the other to make a double thickness and is typically red. Many styles of hats are to be found for men. Choose one that fits your persona and financial status. Kerchiefs can be tied over the head in a “dew-rag” fashion in a pinch. Head gear is not mandatory for men during this era. However, long hair was predominant and if you don’t have long hair, you might do better with a head covering.

Accessories for men- Things to add to your kit would be: kerchief, haversack, waistcoat, and a capot or jacket. Apron of leather.

Waistcoat or Veste is a type of justaucorps that goes down to the knees. It is a sleeved garment with no collar and has buttons on the front. Some research indicates that English waistcoats are made without sleeves, and the French’s were cut with sleeves. A few French waistcoats without sleeves were noted in

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period inventories. The fact that they are listed specifically “without” sleeves leads me to believe that sleeves were more common.

The capot was the jacket of choice for men in New France and was considered ordinary attire. Historically it is predominant over other coats. Its cut is inspired by the justaucorps but is overlapping in front in a double-breasted manner and has a hood. It closes at the neck with a single button. A belt holds it closed around the waist. Capots are commonly made of heavy weight wool, Summer capots are of lighter weight wool. Other choices could include the “mantelet” or justaucorps. English versions were the “frock” coat.