

# NOTES AND ANTIQUITIES

## AMERICAN MILITARY DRESS IN THE WAR OF 1812

### II. General and Staff Officers

There is almost no information of an official character concerning the uniforms worn by Regular Army general officers and their staffs when the second war with Great Britain was declared, June 18, 1812. Indeed, no mention was made of these uniforms in regulations issued as late as December 30 of that year.<sup>1</sup> But it should be remembered that for some time prior to 1812 there had been only three brigadiers and perhaps a half-dozen staff officers and that when war was declared there were but nine general officers in all. Doubtless they wore what they considered most appropriate.

Some idea of the current style may be gained, however, from the portrait of Major General Henry Dearborn painted by Gilbert Stuart in 1812.<sup>2</sup> The ranking general of the Army is shown in what is apparently a double-breasted blue coat with lapels, buttonholes on the breast, and collar embroidered with oak leaves and acorns in gold. The top two or three buttons on the breast remain unbuttoned, the turned back lapels showing that the buttonholes are embroidered inside as well as out. His sword belt is of the shoulder type, made of red morocco leather ornamented with an oval gilt plate. The plate apparently is an ornament only, serving no function as a regulator of length. No device is shown thereon, but a probably contemporary marble bust of Dearborn by Binon, in the Chicago Historical Society, displays on the plate an eagle of Napoleonic type grasping a thunderbolt in its talons. Doubtless this is the "oval plate, three inches by two and a half, ornamented with an eagle" mentioned in the dress regulations of 1800 and later. The shoulder belt for mounted officers, an unusual idea, is also mentioned in these earlier orders.

<sup>1</sup> Adjutant General to Maj. William R. Boote, Deputy Adjutant General of the Southern Department, December 30, 1812, forwarding dress regulations (Adjutant General's Office, Letters Sent Book, III, 59 [National Archives]). A copy of these manuscript regulations

Dearborn, in this portrait, wears a white stock, a shirt ruffle, and a high-collared buff waistcoat. An interesting ornament is the order of the Cincinnati fastened to a buttonhole on the left breast. His sword is not visible, and, since no special model was prescribed, it might have been of any type, curved or straight. The uniform would be completed either by buff kerseymere pantaloons and half-boots or by breeches of the same material with four gilt buttons, an oval buckle at the knee, and high boots of light pattern.

General officers of militia of most of the states at this early period may generally be described as uniformed in blue faced and lined with buff, buff underclothes, yellow buttons and epaulets, and either a chapeau bras or cocked hat. These two forms of hat were by then quite similar except that the former could be folded flat when off the head while the cocked hat was made with a rigid crown. The latter type was found chiefly among older officers. The coats seem to have been of the type that hooked from collar to bottom edge with a broad facing down each side and were usually worn fastened only at the waist by the two lowest hooks. This fashion, of civilian origin, permitted the coat and vest to gap open for about seven inches below the collar, displaying the finely pleated shirt ruffle and white muslin stock tied with a knot in front. Another civilian style led to cutting the bottom of the coat front short enough to uncover the lowest one or two buttons of the waistcoat.

In the matter of details and ornament there was nothing approaching the uniformity we expect today. This was true with Regular and militia commanders and their staffs alike. Swords, sword knots, belts, epaulets, trimming on the chapeaux bras, and lace and embroidery on the coats were all according to personal fancy. This delightful freedom of choice and lack of restriction is indicated, for New York at least, by a letter dated November 27, 1810, from Governor Tompkins to Lewis S. Pintard, who had just been appointed an aide on his staff. The Governor, after mentioning his appointment and sketchily describing the uniform, informed him that "Myself and Aids, to distinguish ourselves from the inferior General Officers and their staff, mount no feathers. The sword, belt, sash, spurs and boots are left to the taste of each aid who also puts embroidery or lace on his coat or not at his pleasure."<sup>3</sup> Obviously, then, any group of state general officers and their staffs must have displayed a complete line of the fashionable and unfashionable footgear, arms, and military haberdashery supplied by the military outfitters of the day, a condition strongly reminiscent of the Civil War.

Early in the summer of 1813 the uniform of the general officers of the Regular Army underwent some radical changes and became somewhat more wearable under the rigors of an American campaign.<sup>4</sup> The official description of the coat is as follows:

<sup>3</sup> *Public Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins, Military* (Albany, 1902), I, 550.

Single breasted, with ten buttons, and button holes worked with blue twist, five inches long at the top and three at the bottom. The standing collar to rise to of the ear, which will determine its width. The cuffs, not less than three and nor more than four inches wide. The skirts faced with blue, the bottom of each not than seven, nor less than three and a half, inches wide; the length to reach to of the knee. The bottom of the breast and two hip buttons to range.

(1) On the collar one blind hole, five inches long, with a button on each side.

(2) The blind holes on each side of the front, in herring-bone form, to be in the direction with the collar, from the top to the bottom.

(3) Blind holes (in the like form) to proceed from four buttons, placed lengthwise each skirt. A gilt star, on centre of the bottom, two inches from the edge.

(4) The cuffs, to be indented within one and a half inch of the edge, with four lengthwise on each sleeve, and holes to the three upper buttons, corresponding to indentation of the cuff, on the center of which is to be inserted the lower button.

(5) All general officers will be permitted to embroider the button holes. The Commissary General of Ordnance, the Adjutants, Inspectors, and Quartermasters General Commissary General of Purchases, will be permitted to embroider the button holes on the collar only.

It will be noticed that general officers were still permitted to embroider buttonholes with oak leaves and acorns, but it is doubtful that such coats were worn for other than dress occasions in the populated districts. A fine example of this later embroidered coat may be seen in the portrait of General Harrison produced on page 135 of the Fall 1937 issue of this JOURNAL. Flat buttons, with or without device, were given up in favor of the "gilt bullet" variety which continued throughout the war.

The fine broadcloth and gold embroidery that made up such coats as those of Generals Dearborn and Harrison were seldom, if ever, exposed to the severe service on the sparsely populated American frontier, though certainly intended that they should be worn on campaign following the European war. For field service and certain other occasions a coat of the same cut, but without embroidery or lace and known as undress, was permitted. This was, however, only concession made by the regulations to the heat, dust, mud, rain, and the underbrush of a comparatively trackless wilderness. General Harrison, we are told, made his Western campaign in an old hunting shirt and common hat, and it is probable that many high-ranking officers adopted equally nondescript habits for such occasions.<sup>3</sup>

Stocks were of black silk or leather. Vests, breeches, and pantaloons were buff color for general officers and white for their staffs. These vests were single breasted, without pocket flaps, and the breeches carried "four buttons on the thigh and gilt knee buckles." In summer officers were permitted to wear pantaloons of nankeen, a yellow or buff cotton fabric of a suitably light weight; in winter they were permitted, but not required, to wear blue pantaloons of a heavier cloth.

<sup>3</sup> *Military Affairs*, I, 425-34. The sections devoted to the uniform are short and incidental. These sections were considerably amplified and slightly altered in the regulation of 1800.

White leg coverings, although quickly soiled by saddle and weather, were more serviceable than would appear at first glance, much more so than the buff. White could be kept clean by the use of pipeclay in default of washing, but buff became streaked and faded when washed and it was almost impossible to restore the shade of the cloth by a mixture of pipeclay and yellow ochre, the usual cleaning material for buff colored leather or cloth. In 1821 the Governor of New York condemned buff for Captain Mott's artillery company at Congress Springs, Saratoga County, saying that blue underclothes or even white would be "for although white shows dirt soon it can be washed oftener without injury. buff will change color by frequent washing . . . which will destroy the uniform in colour of the under cloaths."<sup>9</sup>

Fashion, though unsupported by regulations, came to the rescue with a garment unfamiliar to us today, known as sherryvallies, literally over-trousers or breeches whose outside leg seams were completely open and made to button from the bottom so they could be put on or off over spurred boots and pantaloons. An aide-de-camp, writing of his experiences at Sackett's Harbor in 1813, states that they were worn even before the war, adding that the preparation for a military equitation "was no other than the superinduction of a pair of *cherrivallies* were worn, however, more for the bright buttons and other ornaments of which they seemed to authorize the display, than as a guard against defilements, of which there was not much apprehension under a bright sun and over dry roads.' 'Other ornaments' consisted of, on the front, either braided decorations known as Austrian knots, extending from the top edge part way down the thigh, or flaps with buttons, set sloping in the region of the groin. At the bottom edge inside of the leg was fastened a chain about eighteen inches long which was slipped under the boot and slipped over one of the buttons on the outside seam near the line with the calf. The sherryvallies were invariably reinforced with buckram or other leather on the inside and around the bottom of the legs.<sup>8</sup>

Later in the war it became usual to wear the sherryvallies as trousers, with the pantaloons underneath, which made the buttons on the leg unnecessary. They were consequently done away with except from about the top or the middle of the calf down. In that form, but without the leather, they became an increasingly popular style with foot officers; in fact, from that time on it becomes difficult to distinguish them from trousers, and, although the term sherryvallies remained in the vocabulary of the War Department until 1834 when used to describe the trousers of dragoon privates, it appears to refer only to the reinforcing cloth on the inside and around the bottom of the leg. Of course, these garments

<sup>8</sup> *Tompkins Papers*, III, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, "The First Campaign of an A. D. C.," *Military and Naval Magazine*, 1821, p. 100.

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were not peculiar to America; they had been common among European light cavalry for some years.

Prior to 1813 the most common kind of footwear among general and staff officers was a boot of medium height which extended to the knee, but nearly contemporary portraits show that other types were also in vogue. "Hessians" with scalloped-topped fronts and tassels appear in the painting of General Morgan Lewis of New York,<sup>9</sup> while long boots, of a light make but covering the knee, are to be found in portraits of Regulars. The regulations of 1813 allowed only "high military boots," and these were required as well of those officers taken from the line to serve on a general staff. Spurs were ordered to be of gilt; they were medium in size and had small rowels.

For headdress all general and staff officers wore the chapeau bras, a collapsible hat which could be carried under the arm, without feathers and of the following form:

Fan not less than six and a half, nor more than nine inches high in the rear, nor less than fifteen, nor more than seventeen inches and a half from point to point, bound round the edge with black binding half an inch wide. Button and loop, black. Cockade, the same, four and a half inches diameter, with a gold eagle in the center.

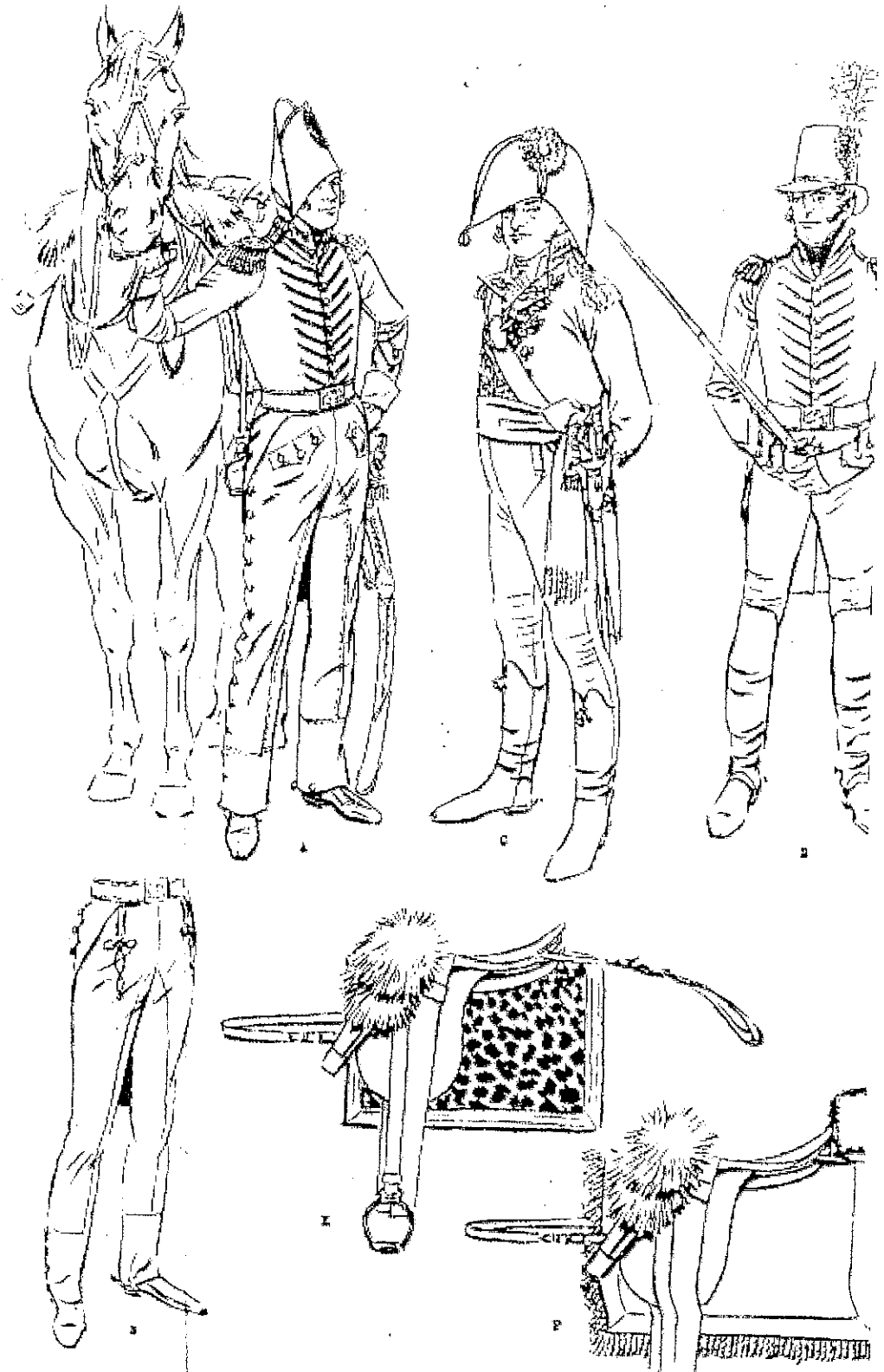
These chapeaux had already begun the shrinking process that was carried to such ridiculous extremes by some British officers, especially Wellington.

Swords were "yellow mounted, with black, or yellow, gripe. For the officers of the Adjutant, Inspector, and Quartermaster General's departments, sabers; for all others, straight swords. Waist belts of black leather. No sashes." Obviously a great many variations of pattern in sword forms could be covered by this inadequate description. The portrait of Harrison mentioned above clearly shows the shape and detail of the hilt of the straight sword beginning to be used by most of the general officers. Though straight swords were required by regulations and carried by most general officers, a notable exception to the rule was Andrew Jackson whose portraits all show a curved saber. An example of one of these sabers, a French army type having a long heavy blade with a deep curve and broad central groove, is in the National Museum, Washington, D. C.<sup>10</sup> The sabers of the staff officers were the familiar pattern with the eagle's head pommel and the single narrow strip curving inward sharply at half the length of the grip and then turning at a sharp angle at the blade, forming a quillon.

The black leather waist belts seem often to have been edged with gold lace, and the plate was apparently rectangular with an eagle of conventional type grasping olive branches and arrows. One of Sully's portraits of Jackson displays an elaborate gold embroidery along the center of the belt as well as the lace edging. The sword is suspended by chains instead of straps.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In the City Hall, New York, New York.

<sup>10</sup> This saber, together with many other examples of this period, is illustrated and dis-



A, Regular Army general staff officer in original sherryvallies, about 1813. B



a scanty cape and a rolling collar, a totally inadequate piece of clothing for sub-zero campaigning. In the West general officers usually substituted coats, but in the East great coats in the fashion of the day were more common. Such coats were of no prescribed color or pattern, and were not supplied with military buttons; in fact, it is not likely that general officers in the field during winter in Canada or on the frontier in the West bore much resemblance to the picture formed for us by the dress regulations. Fur or woolen caps covering the head and ears could be substituted for the chapeau bras; and a great coat could be made of blanket-like material of gray, blue, olive, brown, or a deep piled fawn color. Material known as "lion skin," lined with woolen cloth, sheepskin, or fur could be used to hide all distinctions of rank, except of course the sword which may usually have been worn outside.

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#### DEVOTION BY DRUM-BEAT, 1779

*Heidelberg*—I have seen the troops perform their exercise every morning on the parade ground. I was a good deal surprised to observe, that not only the movements of the soldiers' arms and the attitudes of their bodies, but also their devotions, were under the direction of the major's cane. The following motions are performed as part of the military maneuvres every day before the troops are marched to their different guards.

The major flourishes his cane;—the drum gives a single tap, and every man immediately raises his hand to his hat;—at a second stroke on the drum, they take off their hats and are supposed to pray;—at a third, they finish their petitions, and put them on their heads.— If any man has the assurance to prolong his prayer a minute longer than the drum indicates, he is punished on the spot, and taught to be less devout for the future.

—from *A View of Society and Manners in Switzerland and Germany*, by John Moore

#### QUERIES

38. LEWIS MAP OF 1806. In Elliott Coues' *History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark* is a facsimile reproduction of a map copied by King in 1806 from one sent to President Jefferson by Meriwether Lewis. Coues says that this King version was found in the War Department, but where is the original Map?

#### REPLIES

32. REBEL WAR CRY (III, 136). David L. Thompson, writing of his experience at Antietam (*Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, II, 558), described the "rebel yell" as "a high shrill yelp, uttered without concert, and kept up continually when the fighting was approaching a climax, as an incentive to further effort." He found it quite different from "the deep-breasted Northern cheer, given in unison and after a struggle."