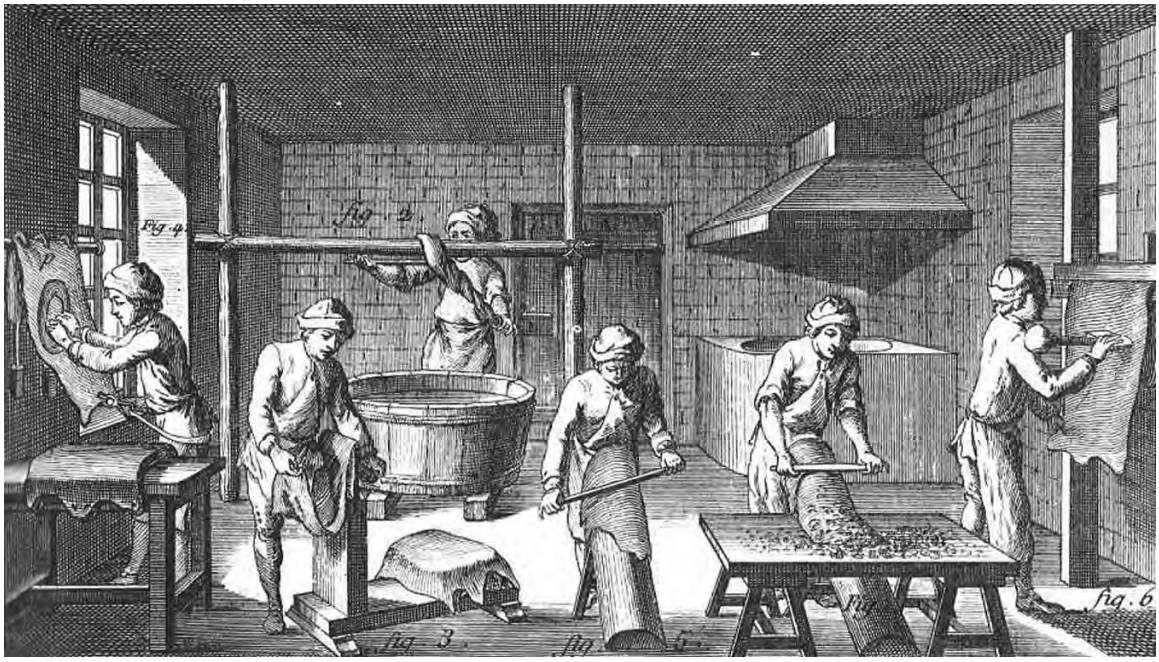
Making the Stand-of-Arms



Over and over again, when reviewing primary sources about the arming and equipping of Loyalist soldiers during the American Revolution, we encounter the term, the "stand-of-arms". By convention, this meant a musket, a waistbelt, a bellybox, a bayonet, a scabbard, and the frog which attached the scabbard to the waistbelt.

Unless you have been involved in the manufacture of the stand-of-arms, you may not realize the work that is involved in creating these essential, albeit modest, accouterments.

We start, of course, with leather. The leather is not the sort of leather used by modern-day manufacturers to make chaps and vests for the biker trade. The waistbelt leather is almost half a centimeter thick, and the leather used for the other pieces of equipment is only fractionally thinner. Leather arrives in hides, which are cured pieces of cow flesh that are sold in sheets. From these, the pieces of the stand-at-arms are cut. Working with leather is exacting, difficult work. Proverbially, it requires a dull needle and a sharp blade. There can be no patching or adjustment. Mistakes cannot be fixed once made.

For the waistbelt, a strip of one-and-a-quarter inch belting is cut using an ingenious device called a belt cutter, which ensures that the cut is straight and consistent. This leather is next stained black with leather stain, and then polished with shoe polish to ensure a clean, shiny appearance. Then, the buckle is added and six inches of the leather turned under and sewn down to hold the buckle in place. Thanks to the careful research of Eric Fernberg, we know that leather seams are best sewn along the same direction to the way the leather is stressed. If we sew perpendicular to the stress, we risk creating a weak point which may give way under strain.

Sewing leather is not as easy as sewing wool or linen. To pass thread through the leather, holes must first be punched using a hammer and a sharp awl. It also helps a great deal if the holes line up. Once the dull needle is passed through the two adjoining pieces of leather, a pair of plyers is often needed to pull the needle completely through. The thread itself is not normal fabric thread. It is strong linen thread, moisturized and lubricated with wax. If this thread were fishing line, it would easily test at fifty pounds weight.

Upon completion of the waistbelt, the manufacturer moves on to making a frog. The frog is the odd little piece of kit which holds the bayonet scabbard and through the loop of which the waistbelt is passed to hold all onto the soldier's waist. The frog is two pieces of leather sewn together. The back piece is the part which folds back under itself to form the loop through which the belt is passed. The front piece attaches to the back piece to form the envelope through which the scabbard passes. We are fortunate that original

frogs exist, and Eric Fernberg carefully examined several to determine that they were not merely sewn, but also riveted with copper rivets, so that the belt loop and the bayonet envelope would hold strong.

Oddly enough, the copper rivets which complete the frog are still sold by Tandy Leather, and are almost precisely the same as the eighteenth century originals. Since copper is a comparatively soft and malleable metal, they are very difficult to work with. Once the copper washer is slid over the rivet, the manufacturer attempts to peen the top of the rivet into a mushroom shape so that the washer will not slip off. Usually, the shaft of the rivet bends during this process, and wise manufacturers will invest in a simple tool which helps create the mushroom shape, but does not do much to prevent the warping of the rivet shaft. Have a close look at your frog and you will see what I mean.

Also note that the original frogs had white thread, not black. This means that the leather parts of the frog are stained black and polished before they are sewn together. We do this so that the crossed-ex pattern remains white and visible against the black leather, as it was with the originals.

I will not comment on the manufacture of bayonet scabbards, since I have never been able to figure out how they are made. Suffice to say, measuring leather so that it gradually tapers to a point, and then sewing a back-seam to hold it all together, requires more technical skill than I possess. When I need a new scabbard, I buy one from a sutler.

The bellybox is a more exotic accoutrement yet. For the first time, the manufacturer is compelled to work in wood as well as leather and metal. If your bellbox is well-made, it will have a gradual curve in the horizontal plane so that it fits snugly against your waist. This is achieved by cutting a larger block of wood with a bandsaw. Once the shape is formed, the manufacturer sands the edges and adds the cartridge holes before painting the box black. Once the paint dries, a leather cover is added to protect the cartridges from water and to keep them from falling out of the box. This leather cover is attached with small nails, and the careful manufacturer tries to ensure that these go into the wood and do not encroach on the holes themselves. Once completed, the bellybox can be added to the waistbelt to complete the stand of arms.

There remains an original bellybox in the Parks Canada collection which is on display at Fort Wellington in Prescott. It may have belonged to Major Edward Jessup, who raised and commanded Jessup's Corps during the Revolution.

The next time you put on your stand-of-arms, take a moment to reflect on the hours that are required to manufacture each individual piece. Bear in mind that most of these accouterments are made by your fellow Yorkers. They are volunteers, and often do not even seek remuneration for their efforts. Then bear in mind the research that pre-dated the manufacturer. This is a remarkable achievement – a set of historically-accurate webbing which is made in the homes of individual hobbyists who work not for profit, but for the love of the hobby.

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