

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts



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Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



Seaman's Clothing in *Friendship's* Era

Volume III, number 2
March 2002

The appearance of the ordinary merchant seamen of the 1790s through 1812 era can be loosely determined from sketches, prints, cartoons and descriptions, but the fine detail found in formal paintings is not usually present. The man before the mast is generally depicted as background in illustrations of events and famous heroes in action.

Even in the naval services, uniformity of clothing was only beginning to be considered necessary. It was recognized that a crew who appeared to be more than rabble made a better impression and dress regulations began to appear. The Royal Navy's sailors were increasingly becoming more uniform in appearance, and Napoleon took the concept of uniformity to the extreme. Believing that looking good built loyalty and efficiency, he took this concept to heart and dictated new French naval uniform regulations. Prior attempts had been made to put the sailors of the French navy into uniforms, but as the fleet was rebuilt following the disaster at Trafalgar in 1805, Napoleon organized the navy into battalions similar to the army. Naturally, being a general rather than a sailor, his instructions resulted in the seamen looking much like soldiers. On April 1, 1808 he decreed that each of these battalions would be outfitted similar to his infantry regiments, each having colored trim coded to its organizational number.¹ The uniforms were not practical for the business at hand, although the colorful new clothing, complete with gaiters and tall leather shako hats of the army style, was a knockout for formal occasions and going ashore.

It seems that some effort towards uniformity was even to be found on private vessels as evidenced by the tiny figures shown on ship portraits, such as Michele Felice Corne's 1799 painting of Elias Hasket Derby's ship *Mount Vernon*, Elias Hasket Derby, Jr., Master, meeting a British Squadron. A livery of blue jackets and white trousers is evident, as are the tarred black sailors' hats of the era. No doubt Captain Derby intended to impress his British counterparts with a show of American pride.

Period illustrations show the high-ankle, fall (flap) fronted straight-legged trousers common to workmen ashore as well as knee breeches, sometimes in the same illustrations. The wide, apron-like "petticoat" trousers seem to have been going out of common fashion at the dawn of the 19th century, as the knee breeches that they protected became less common among the working class. These styles tended to have a baggy seat for mobility gathered to a waistband that was drawstring adjustable at the center of the back. Pockets were located on the inner front flaps, waistbands and at the side seams. The concept of suspenders (braces) was understood, however the available illustrations do not show seamen wearing them at this time. However, some knee breeches had suspender buttons installed. Trousers and breeches could have been made of duck (canvas in various weights, predominantly flax/linen), wool (kersey weave frequently used, the material of choice for military clothing), osnaburg (coarse sheeting woven in solid colors, stripes or checks commonly used for work

clothes) and all sorts of homespun fabrics.

Sailor's trousers would frequently be white or natural canvases if made of duck, or the grays, blues and browns of work clothes of the period. Striped trousers are also seen.

For looking presentable, white trousers and a double-breasted, waist-length blue wool roundabout jacket (commonly called a "monkey" jacket) was the height of fashion. Waistcoats are shown worn with jackets and appear in descriptions of individuals, but seem to be losing ground as a part of the common seaman's garb. Dana mentions the checked shirts and blue jackets, still popular in the 1830s, but not waistcoats.²

It is to be noted that seamen also wore jackets of colors other than the idealized blue. Buttons mentioned in clothing descriptions of the period include pewter, brass, wood, cloth covered, and leather.³ Large mother of pearl buttons, worn in two rows, found favor in the Royal Navy on an unofficial basis.⁴

A black or colorful kerchief was part of the traditional necessities for a seaman; useful to protect the back of the jacket from the grease or tar of the traditional sailor's pigtail, and it sometimes served in place of a hat while working.

Shoes were either the old buckled style or the increasingly popular lace up model favored by President Jefferson and known afterwards, not surprisingly, as Jeffersons. If the individual owned boots, they went with him. The leather was preserved with a mixture of melted grease and tar.⁵ Naturally, weather permitting, bare feet were the order of the day for washing down the decks.

Stockings were seen in natural white, gray or colors. They could have been knitted, or cut from fabric and seamed at the back.

The wide, bell bottomed trousers now associated with sailors seem to have been evolving during this period. As full-length trousers increased in popularity, the shorter ankle length trousers, worn with gaiters (short spats or leggings) by soldiers and civilians ashore and without gaiters by seamen, went out of fashion. Wider bottoms on the longer trousers made it easier to roll the legs up to prevent soaking.

Work shirts of the period were of a simple pattern, long in the tail, having a partial opening down the front and a normal sized collar (the seaman's blouse, with a decorated large, square flap came later). Sources frequently mention checks being popular with seamen, but other patterns also appear as well as plain white, gray and red. They could have been of any available natural fiber. Wool was highly regarded for providing warmth while wet.

Hats worn by seamen included a number of options. The traditional (tarpaulin) black tarred or painted canvas, low crowned, round brimmed hat was the classic sailor hat of the mid-18th through mid- 19th centuries. Straw hats of this shape were also common. Knitted caps of various colors were an absolute necessity in cold weather and strong winds. Based on the English Monmouth cap of the 1600s, variants ranged from stocking caps to something identical to the modern watch cap.

While commercially manufactured clothing was available, seamen traditionally made much of their own outfit, or “duds” as the men called all articles of clothing⁶, usually of canvas, during off duty hours. Clothing was a major investment and if clothes didn’t actually make the man, they did (barely) manage to keep him alive under the worst possible living conditions. Ships carried clothing to be made available to the men (traditionally called slops), but it was a very expensive proposition for Jack Tar. The ship owners deducted the amount, sometimes exorbitant, from his pay. While the typical seaman bought what he could not make, the cost of clothing encouraged him to make everything that he could and patch everything that could be saved a little longer. Surviving examples (of somewhat later manufacture, but typical of the age) show great skill in tailoring and embroidery.

Foul weather gear was initially a regular pair of trousers and a shirt painted with tar to waterproof them, in the manner of the tarpaulin hats. Not comfortable, but effective. Later versions were made of lighter weight cloth soaked in linseed oil, the predecessors of the rubberized highly visible yellow slickers still popular today. Unfortunately, the treated clothing had a flaw; it was subject to spontaneous combustion if improperly stored.

In cold weather, Guernsey frocks (sweaters), mittens (not worn when working aloft), drawers, and wearing clothing in layers seem to have made life bearable.

Richard Henry Dana, probably the most articulate of the few seamen who took the time to describe life aboard a 19th century sailing ship in nearly photographic detail, addresses the efforts of the men to take care of their clothing needs. “In the forenoon watches below, our fore-castle looked like the workshop for what the sailor is-a Jack-at -all-trades. Thick stockings and drawers were darned and patched: mittens dragged from the bottom of the chest and mended; comforters made for the neck and ears; old flannel shirts cut up to line monkey- jackets; south-westerns were lined with flannel and a pot of paint smuggled forward to give them a coat on the outside; and everything turned to hand; so that, although two years had left us with but a scanty wardrobe, yet the economy and invention which necessity teaches a sailor soon put each of us in pretty good trim for bad weather, before we had seen the last of the fine”.⁷

Notes

¹ Rene Chartrand, *Napoleon's Sea Soldiers* (London, 1990), p.33.

² Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast* (New York, 1965), p.182.

³ Smithsonian Institution, *Jack Tar, American Profiles of Merchant Seafarers, 1794-1810* (Washington, D.C., 1975), various exhibit captions.

⁴ Lieutenant Commander A.D. Taylor, *Royal Canadian Navy, Customs Of The Navy* (Digby, Nova Scotia, 1961), excerpt from chapter III.

⁵ Dana, p. 219.

⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed., *The Yarn of a Yankee Privateer*, p. 36.

⁷ Dana, p. 220.

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