

**The Uniform of
George Rogers Clark's
Illinois Regiment of Virginia State Forces
From October 1778 through February 1779
(The period of the attack on Vincennes)**

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There has been much misinformation created and disseminated over the last two-plus centuries since George Rogers Clark and his little army made their incredible march from Kaskaskia to Vincennes. Probably the most common misconception of these men has them in frontier buckskins with fur caps, toting their rifles across the flood in garb more appropriate to the Rocky Mountain trapper period. The author has suspected for years that Clark's men looked a great deal more military than popular myth would support. The drilling of the men on Corn Island and the harangues delivered to his men while "on parade" at Kaskaskia mentioned in his letters and journals indicate a military force and not a motley mob of frontiersmen. It is not possible at this writing to lay to rest all of the misconceptions, but this article will directly address the subject of their clothing.

A firm indication of an issue of materials and equipment of a uniform or standard issue were the results of research done by Marko Zlatich in the early 1960's for his Company of Military Historians article on the 1780 uniform for the Illinois Regiment. In the materials he transmitted to the living history unit recreating the Illinois Regiment were included transcripts of inventories listing goods issued earlier than 1780. This and other entries stimulated the author's interest in actually viewing the collections at Richmond used by Mr. Zlatich, which he and two compatriots, Ron Bolser and Dave Hast, accomplished in August of 1989. One of the specific purposes in this research was to find the nature of the clothing which the regiment might have worn on its march to Vincennes. There the specific materials that Mr. Zlatich had used in his research were reviewed along with a wealth of additional data.

The most exciting listing which Mr. Zlatich had originally transcribed showed dates from September 5, 1778 through January 12, 1779. Looking over the listings in the original which indicate issues of large quantities of cloth, shoes, and hats to Captain Williams' Company, Captain Worthington's Company, and Captain Bowman's Company quickly put to rest the fur cap and buckskin myth.. The issue records showed enough "cloth" and "flannel" (both referring to wool cloth in the 18th Century context) to uniform every man in each company, and then some. And there were enough hats and shoes issued for what we believe had to be full company strength based on rosters and Clark's own comments.¹

¹ Entry 205, Box 658, Quartermaster's Records, George Rogers Clark Papers Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

The following tables summarize the specific company issues as well as the total quantities issued to the regiment for whatever purpose at the end of the summer and early fall of 1778:²

Recipient of Issue	Blue Cloth	White Cloth	Flannel
<i>“Issued ...at Sundry Times for the use of the Troops”</i> (Sept. 5, 1778)	4 bales 15 bales white and blue	4 bales (See previous entry)	
<i>“Cap^t John Williams”</i> (Sept. 17, 1778)	13 yds 165 ells	121.5 ells	42 yds
<i>“Cap^t Edw^d Worthington”</i> (Sept. 18, 1778)	37.5 ells 2.5 yds	19.5 ells 15 ells 1.25 yds 4 ells	12.25 ells
<i>“Maj. Joseph Bowman”</i> (Sept. 17, 1778)	172.75 ells	5.5 ells	1 bolt

The following table includes significant data on buttons, shirts and weapons to show the extent of the issued material:³

Recipient of Issue	Buttons	Hats	Shoes (pair)	Shirts white & check	Fusees & Guns (Fusees = Spanish Muskets)
<i>“Issued ...at Sundry Times for the use of the Troops”</i> (Sept. 5, 1778)	1 case pewter	153	150 18 fine	164 69 fine	29 fusees
<i>“Cap^t John Williams”</i> (Sept. 17, 1778)		49	78	107	
<i>“Cap^t Edw^d Worthington”</i> (Sept. 18, 1778)		16 1 castor (fine)	26	34 1 fine	2 guns [author's note: also fusees?]
<i>“Maj. Joseph Bowman”</i> (Sept. 17, 1778)		38	67	100	

As is clear from the amount of material, it cannot be said that the regiment was ill-supplied in terms of potential clothing. It is fortunate that the record keeping was so methodical in terms of company issue. It is also fortunate that the colors of the bulk of the cloth issued to the troops were recorded in these inventories. Presumably the fine shoes, castor (beaver felt) hats and fine shirts would have been for the officers based upon the structure and timing of the issue records.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

[It is interesting to note issue of twenty-nine Spanish “fusees”, as the Spanish called the muskets issued to their troops. It is a quick swipe at the myth that all Clark’s men were armed with rifles on the Vincennes expedition.]

The dearth of records from the fall of 1778 lead to the conclusion that the Illinois Regiment had not quite formalized its handling of its supplies. [It is interesting to note that two of Clark’s first actions after the taking of Ft. Sackville at Vincennes in February 1779 were: (1) order an inventory of stores back on the Mississippi be done by the newly arrived Captain George (late of Willing’s Marines) and (2) appoint a Conductor General of Stores.] From the records available in the papers at Richmond, prior to the Vincennes campaign, the issue of rations was recorded even less clearly and regularly than the clothing. After Vincennes, many of the formal records appear to have been pulled together in anticipation of reimbursement of funds and notes by the Virginia state government.

This rank consciousness assumes even more importance in regard to the discovery of a payment record from June of 1779. The transcription here is provided in a format as close to the original as possible:

D^r the State of Virginia for making the Cloathing of Captain Joseph Bowman's Company of Peter Beaufrene Taylor

Viz^t

To making Coats Jackets & Breeches for 22 men @ 6 D^{ll} each 132 Dollars

To making of 8 P^r of Breeches. . . . @ 2 D^{ll} each . . 16 "

One hundred & Forty Eight amount in Dollars 148 D^{ll}

Received the above amount of one hundred and Forty-Eight dollars in full of Major Bowman at Kahos [Cahokia] this 11th day of May 1779

beaufrenez

Kaskaskia June 20th 1779 then received of Collo George Rogers Clark the above Account of one Hundred & Forty Eight Dollars which I certify to be Just & True

Jo^s Bowman⁴

This is an extremely interesting document, which triggered a whole series of digging to determine its meaning. It was possible that this was a uniform issue either for new replacements (either from Montgomery's recruits out of the Holston settlements or some French) for Bowman's Company or to replace gear for troops who lost or destroyed it on the Vincennes campaign three

⁴ Entry 204, Box 617, General Correspondence, George Rogers Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, Richmond Virginia.

months earlier. This was superb information as it seemed very logical that new uniforms would be made to look like those worn previously or by the rest of the unit – evidence of the appearance of the entire regiment. From this evidence, it appears that the unit had worn coats, jackets (sleeved weskits), and breeches, which should refute the coonskin cap and buckskin nonsense. The refuting evidence then would be what the replacements' uniforms looked like after Vincennes.

However, on closer reading there was something peculiar about this invoice - the rank for Bowman was wrong as he was in fact a major in May of 1779. Such mis-statement of rank in the regiment's own records over the officer's own signature appears to fly in the face of the rank consciousness of the period.

When Joseph Bowman left Kaskaskia for Vincennes, he formally held the rank of Captain. But he was called “major” probably as a brevet rank (raised temporarily without formal commission to an acting rank) prior to the expedition as well as during the expedition itself. Immediately after the fall of Ft. Sackville, word arrived from Virginia that Bowman had been formally commissioned a major, which event is noted as a significant event in Bowman's own journal of the march:

"27.[February, 1779] The Willing our Batteau arriv'd to the great Mortification of all on board, that they had not the honor to assist us in the same, Came W^m Mires express from Williamsburgh With very good news - Capt. Bowman receives a Majors commisⁿ inclosed from the Gov^r."⁵

The discrepancy in Bowman's rank in the May 19, 1779 Beaufrenez voucher was incentive to keep on digging to determine what might have been going on with this uniform invoice. The hunt for other invoices and receipts from the same period turned up a voucher attesting to the manufacture of five flags (unfortunately lacking a description) for some Indians and one flag for the garrison of the "fort" at Cahokia (again lacking a description) by a “Damme Quenet”.

Without repeating the part of the receipt in French, the following is a transcription of the final English remark: [Note the phonetic spelling of *Beaufrenez* in the first line.]

Judged by Cap^t Turringo & Bofraine
both Taylors And Agreed on by both

⁵Page 163, Major Bowman's Journal, March, 1779, Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library, Volume VII, Virginia Series, Volume IV, George Rogers Clark Papers 1771-1781, ed. James Alton James, II; Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield Illinois, 1913.

partys for flags for making of five Small Colors for
[torn] two Dollars
and a half & for making of the
flag for the garrison . Two Dollars
as witness our hands this 27 Day
of October 1778 piergodin

Dollars gapiten
22 1/2 Allow paid for the above
Account _____
P^r Jo^s Bowman⁶

The reverse of this bill was marked: "No. 252, State of Virginia to Madame Kenell, 22 1/2 dollars".⁷ [Looking at "Quenet" and the Virginian phonetic spelling "Kenell", verbal communications between the two language groups at Cahokia and Kaskaskia must have been interesting.]

[The document is all the more interesting for its mention of the tailor, Mr. Beaufrenez, attesting to another seamstress' work completed in October of 1778.]

The inclusion of this voucher with the clothing manufacture bill from June of the following year was an interesting juxtaposition.

This Quenet voucher turns up again in proximity to the Beaufrenez voucher for Captain Bowman's Company's uniforms in another summary list as follows:

*"The State of Virginia for the expenses of the
Troops Stationt at Kohoas under Maj Bowman
To Geo Rogers Clark . . D^r"⁸*

⁶ Entry 204, Box 614, General Correspondence, George Rogers Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Entry 204, Box 614, Western Expedition Quartermasters Records, George Rogers Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

This particular document carries invoices from July 27 of 1778 to May 22 of 1779 and is concluded with the final statement which appears as follows:

"Ft. Patrick Henry Aug^t 5th 1779

This is to certify that the above acct of Four
Thousand One Hundred & Fifteen Dollars
& Fourteen Sous is Just & True as appears by autograf &
my hand at Kohoas

Jo^s Bowman^{"9}

This particular document appears to be a summary of bills paid under Bowman's authorization at Cahokia, which he signed at Ft. Patrick Henry in Vincennes shortly before his death. The Beaufrenez entry for 148 dollars appears three items before the Kenell [Virginian phonetic spelling of Quenet] entry for the flags with the note "omited" [Sic] before it in the margin. As this summary list of bills is chronological, the date of the Quenet voucher is significant. It appears that the Damme Quenet (Kenell as pronounced by the Virginians) voucher (of 27 October 1778) is listed in chronological order after the Beaufrenez voucher.

Another document which summarized vouchers submitted for reimbursement by the western commissioners for George Rogers Clark was titled as follows:

"Abstract from Brigadier Gen^l Geo R Clarks Acct
of Sundry Payments, Expenses & other Disbursements by him made on behalf
of the State of Virg^a in the Illinois Department, Viz^t"¹⁰

This is a two-page document which is a fragment of a larger record. These two pages summarize a number of expenditures made in 1778. In this document both the Beaufrenez and "Kenell" expenditures are listed. It looks like Clark's bookkeepers again sorted out his expenditures chronologically, and they have both expenditures, Beaufrenez's for 148 dollars and Madame "Kenell's" for 22 1/2, in the fall of 1778.

That such delays in payment for goods or services of this kind was not uncommon is indicated by a notice recorded as posted in the Court at Cahokia in May or June 1779 by Captain Richard McCarty as cited by Alvord in his Illinois Historical Collection work on Cahokia. The plan was for the regiment to move on Detroit in June of 1779 and set up a new base there. McCarty asks that since he will be leaving the country [Illinois] for some period, he wants anyone to come forward with his "Bons or notes" ["Bon" was a word used by the French on the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Entry 205, Box 656, Western Expedition Quartermasters Records, George Rogers Clark Papers, Virginia State Library, Richmond Virginia.

Mississippi referring to a commitment to pay] so that he might settle them. Bowman probably was doing the same during May and June as the regiment was in a rush to prepare for the intended expedition on Detroit. In fact, the Detroit campaign was postponed indefinitely when necessary reinforcements failed to arrive at Vincennes to support the expedition.

Subsequent research through the microfilm edition of the George Rogers Clark Papers from the Virginia State Library reveals a whole series of vouchers for purchase of goods or services by Joseph Bowman which were accomplished prior to the Vincennes campaign, but which were not paid until May of 1779. One of them lists purchases as early as August 15, 1778 which were not paid until May 19, of 1779.¹¹

There is another item of evidence of the timing of the uniform issue. The first part of this evidence is a pay roll titled:

“A Pay Roll of Capt. Joseph Bowman’s Companey [sic] of foot At the Illenoise [sic] under the Command of Collo. George Rogers Clark - Commencing the 8th of August and Ending the 14th of December 1778”¹²

This should be compared with another payroll titled:

“A Pay Roll of Captn Abm Kellars Company continued, at the Illinois under the Command of Colo. George Rogers Clark Commencing the 14th of December & ending the 8th of May 1779”¹³

The names of the company officers and men are identical. The exceptions are Captain Joseph Bowman in the first pay roll and his absence in the second. The second exception is Lieutenant Abraham Kellar in the first pay roll who becomes Captain Abraham Kellar in the second. It appears that Bowman appears to have been brevetted major in December when Abraham Kellar was elevated to a captaincy to command Bowman’s old company. It is clear from Clark’s letter to Mason, that Bowman’s company was in the march.¹⁴ But it appears that the reference in Bowman’s own journal to “Captain Bowman’s company” may actually refer to his old company under the command of Abraham Kellar.¹⁵ According to the unit rosters, Captain Bowman had turned over his company to Abraham Kellar in December of 1778 to

¹¹ Images 910, 911, Reel 1, George Rogers Clark Papers, Microfilm Edition, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

¹² Page 8, George Rogers Clark and His Men Military Records, 1778-1784, Marjorie Heberling Harding, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, KY.

¹³ Page 9, Ibid.

¹⁴ Page 437, Clark’s Letter to Mason, William Hayden English, *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio, 1778-1783 and Life of George Rogers Clark*, (Reprint, Arno Press, Inc., 1971.

¹⁵ Pages 572, 575, Bowman’s Journal, William Hayden English, *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio, 1778-1783 and Life of George Rogers Clark*, (Reprint, Arno Press, Inc., 1971.

assume his rank of major in the regiment. Bowman called himself 'captain' in his journal and notes that his formal commission to major approved by the Governor arrived on February 27, 1779 at Vincennes.

To summarize this winding trail of documents, the tailor Beaufrenez may have made the uniforms in the Spring of 1779. However, the Beaufrenez voucher is placed chronologically before the October 1778 Quenet/Kenell flag voucher on the account signed by Bowman. Likewise, the Beaufrenez voucher is chronologically placed before the Quenet voucher on Clark's accounts given to the Western Commissioners. These chronologies indicate that the voucher refers to uniforms made before the Vincennes march. Finally, the passing of command from Captain Joseph Bowman to Captain Abraham Kellar on December 14 of 1778 appears to fix the latest moment Beaufrenez could have made uniforms for Captain Bowman's Company, thus explaining the rank discrepancy in rank on the May 1779 payment voucher.

By a fluke, then, because of a delay in the payment, we appear to have perhaps the only discovered voucher for payment for manufacture of some of the Illinois Regiment uniforms worn on the expedition to Vincennes.

To repeat, the voucher says that Captain Bowman's company of the Illinois Regiment wore coats, jackets (meaning sleeved weskits in usual 18th century parlance), and breeches made primarily of blue and white cloth along with their issued hats and shoes. It is the most logical conclusion that this was essentially the same uniform, at least in basic structure and colors, worn by the rest of the Regiment. The only people not wearing this uniform for the attack would have been the last minute volunteers collected for the most part in Captain Charleville's and Captain McCarty's companies.

So what did the uniform look like?

Apparently at this period the Spanish had concluded that they would use French style uniforms on their Louisiana Regiment which existed from 1769 to 1803 from the French inhabitants of their new colony on the west side of the Mississippi. Rene Chartrand in his article on the Spanish Louisiana Regiment states the following:

"The basic uniform, said to have been worn at the time of the regiment's formation in 1769, was always described as: white coat, blue collar, cuffs, and lining, blue waistcoat and breeches, white metal buttons and white lace hat. Apart from the white 'metal and lace', this was practically identical to the uniform of the French colonial troops whom the regiment replaced, and may be a

*conscious effort to minimize the psychological effects of the colony's cession to Spain on the sensitive French inhabitants as well as the Indians."*¹⁶

At this point the reader should note that the Louisiana Regiment's uniform which was so familiar to the local French and Indian inhabitants is a single breasted coat, a sleeved waistcoat (jacket), and breeches. Clark was certainly not one to miss a good propaganda opportunity, and it certainly would be easier to ask tailors to make uniforms they already knew how to make. A similar appearance to the old French colonial or then current Louisiana uniforms is very defensible.

A review of the number of gilt buttons issued to the junior officers of the regiment is useful in establishing the structure of the coat, as these would most likely be the buttons used on the coats.

Lt. Abraham Kellar	2 Doz gilt Buttons
Lt. John Rogers	2 ½ Doz Buttons
Capt. John Williams	2 ½ Doz gilt buttons

These officers received this button issue in the fall of 1778.¹⁷

Twenty-four or even thirty buttons would not support the typical double-breasted regimental coat. Such a coat would require twenty buttons for the lapels alone and leave too few buttons for sleeves, pockets and rear vents as was customary in eighteenth century military coats. A typical double-breasted military regimental would require something like thirty-six to forty-two buttons. It appears then that the regimentals issued to the Illinois Regiment in the fall of 1778 were single breasted to require so few buttons, and would be similar in appearance to the uniforms of the Louisiana Regiment as described by Rene Chartrand.

So, having established a likely structure for the clothing, all that remains is the coloring. The bulk of the cloth issued was either blue or white. The coat would likely be blue with white cuffs, collars and turnbacks. This was, after all, a Virginia State Line regiment, and blue historically was the base coat color for Virginia state troops. Also, since the cloth originated from Spanish stores, it may have actually been the same colors as the Louisiana Regiment's cloth in their uniforms. Therefore, a secondary reason for using blue-faced-white could have been to distinguish the Illinois Regiment from the Louisiana Regiment's white-faced-blue.

¹⁶ Pages 36 & 37, "The Spanish Louisiana Regiment, 1769-1803", Rene Chartrand, Military History Illustrated, Vol. 12, April/May 1988.

¹⁷ Entry 205, Box 658. Western Expedition Quartermasters Records, Virginia State Library. Richmond, Virginia.

As for small clothes, the proportion of blue and white cloth or flannel (probably in natural "white" wool color as no color is mentioned in the record) was about equal. Therefore, making the coats of blue would seem to dictate that the remaining uniform items in the other major colors available - white wool cloth or natural white wool flannel.

It is useful at this point to note that 18th century convention holds that "cloth" means "wool", and that "flannel" likewise generally refers to "wool" flannel and not the 20th century cotton-type flannel with which most of us are familiar. Other types of "cloth" usually have names which include the base material.

Lest someone worry about stockings, their issue is mentioned in the same record cited for the cloth. Also, the knee-length stockings in the 18th century could be made from cloth rather than knitted.

It is likely that the hats issued to the Illinois Regiment from the Spanish stores would have been already cocked in the Spanish military style, which uses hooks to hold up the brim rather than lacing as would be typical of British style cocked hats. Since the cockades in cocked hats were national symbols, it is logical to assume Clark would have replaced a Spanish cockade with the typical black cockade worn by American troops.

The total uniform appearance would be as follows:

- (1) Blue-faced-white single-breasted French-colonial style coat
- (2) Sleeved waistcoat, usually in white or natural white-wool
- (3) Knee breeches usually in white or natural white wool
- (4) Cocked tri-cornered hat with white edge binding
- (5) Shoes

Back to the contrast between what really happened versus the myth of the coonskin and buckskin clad frontiersmen - - -

Clark's regulars wore uniforms. The new volunteers who were raised just prior to the February 1779 march on Vincennes, being mainly French with a possible leavening of some eastern hunters, certainly would not have looked like Rocky Mountain trappers either. This conjures an image of a unit on the march to Vincennes which is a mixture of (1) blue-faced white uniformed troops with cocked hats, (2) French in civilian clothing (possibly with some remnants of old French Marine or militia equipment), and (3) a small number of American civilian volunteers from the former British colonies.

Unfortunately for those who still want to believe that all the remaining English-speakers in Clark's command looked like eastern frontiersmen, Clark himself refers in his writing after the

campaign to the men, at least from the company raised on the Holston, as being comprised at least in part of townsmen. A fact which may somewhat comfort those resisting the fact-based image presented above, may be that even if all were not frontiersmen, at least they were generally issued the common frontier weapon, a long knife, if they didn't already have one.¹⁸ This weapon became the basis for one of the Indian names for the Americans on the frontier, which also became the Indians' commonly used name for the Illinois Regiment – the 'Long Knives'.

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In any case, after years of searching and speculation, it is possible to finally state with confidence for the regularly enlisted members of the Illinois Regiment - whether they were townsmen, farmers, or frontiersmen - who made the daring and dangerous march to Vincennes in the winter of 1779: "**They were uniformed!**"

Respectfully submitted,

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¹⁸ Entry 204, Box 617, Western Expedition Quartermasters Records, Virginia State Library. Richmond, Virginia.