

Kitty Calash ~ Confessions of a Known Bonnet-Wearer

Over(h)alls, Trousers, & Breeches, oh, my!

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POSTED BY KITTYCALASH IN CLOTHING, HISTORY, MUSEUMS

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Tags

10th Massachusetts, 18th century clothes, common dress, menswear, Research, resources, Revolutionary War, soldiers

Gentleman can agree to disagree on the attributed date of this garment, just as gentlemen might agree to differ on whether to call these trousers or overalls. It's all in the crotch length, friends, and we'll just back away.

But before I return a book of letters to the lender, I wanted to record some of the details that struck me.

Right from the start, the *John Buss Letters*, edited by Ed Nash, are filled with details. I got excited because, in a slightly random and not at all fabric-hoarding way, I purchased a remnant of grey striped woolen goods from Wm Booth, with the intention of making a jacket or trousers from the fabric.

This notion was rejected by my resident tenant farmer, who has particular ideas about his appearance and the quality of goods which should encase his limbs. Rebuffed from my historic fashion fantasy, I turned for solace to the John Buss letters, determined to make it all up by learning the history of the tenant farmer's new regiment.

And lo, on page 9, in the very second letter, John writes home to his parents in Leominster, MA on October 1, 1776, saying that "my trowis has got very thin, I should be very glad if mother would make me a pare of striped wooling trowis as son as you can..." My tenant farmer was not impressed by my excitement.

Yes, all my fantasies *are* documented. But look: John Buss's *trousers* are thin, not his breeches. And he's clear about the difference between trousers, overalls and breeches. In a February 22, 1778 letter from Valley Forge, Buss tells how he drawd from stores in Bennington "one frock, one Jacket, one Pare overalls, one of stockings, one Pare of shoes and one shirt. Albany, October 25th., 1777, I drawd a Red Jacket Quemans Pattern. November 5th., I drawd a pare of Braches and a pare of fresh shoes that was not worth tow shillings."



Trousers, ca 1793. MMA,1988.342.3

Later, Buss requests lining (linen) to make breeches, as he is hot. So he draws clear distinctions between these garment forms. This is a costumer's dream, really, and for me—oh, those striped wooling trowis! Now I *have* to make them. Look out, Young Mr...they're headed your way. And lucky me, I have documentation for that red broadcloth remnant I bought in a random and utterly non-fabric-hoarding way.



About kittycalash

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thoughts on “Over(h)alls, Trousers, & Breeches, oh, my!”

1. *said:* Nancy N

[March 26, 2013 at 11:59 am](#)

Wow! I thought trousers & breeches were just 2 words for the same basic garment, i.e. pants! Did one wear both at the same time, and if so, which went next to the body?

Thanks for this, I bet your felt like you'd tapped a gold mine.

Auntie N

REPLY

◦ *said:* kittycalash

[March 26, 2013 at 4:39 pm](#)

As far as I understand it, drawers go next to the body. Thomas Jefferson had them, and there's a pair at Williamsburg. Breeches are short and buckle, tie, or button at the knee. Trousers are ankle length or longer, and are loose where they end. In this period, overalls are full length and cover the shoe, often with a strap under the foot. At least, that's how I understand it.

The letters are pretty interesting. John Buss wrote well about clothes and food—he loved cheese and cider, and writes really longingly of cheese. Good stuff, and I got to keep the little book!

REPLY

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