

American Military Canteens of the Revolutionary War

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Editor's Note: Craig Nannos and Rex Kessler displayed these Revolutionary War canteens at our Annapolis, Maryland meeting. They elected to write an article on these rare items. Even though both have spoken at other meetings on various topics, this is an excellent way to make a presentation for the Society without giving a talk. As research continues, this may also become a relevant oral presentation.

One of the rarest accoutrements of the Revolution, other than textile components, is the wood canteen. They were manufactured in great quantities, and wood construction was favored by both Colonial as well as British forces over the tin/metal examples. It is our opinion that it kept the water fresher and reduced the heating of a metal container.

The utilitarian nature of the item, which would find continued use after the Revolution, and the fragile aspect of a wood container are the principal factors explaining few existing canteens. Those with a provenance to the original owner or found branded with "U: STATES" for government ownership reduce the extant examples to an extremely rare group of survivors.

The canteens discussed in this article provide the reader with examples of this important component of a soldier's equipment. After a review of collections containing existing canteens, we found four basic styles of construction. These are:

- wood canteen with interlocking wooden hoops
- wood canteen with iron hoops
- wood canteen with a single curved end piece (commonly identified as a "Cheese box" canteen)
- small barrel canteen (known as rundlets /rum kegs/swiglers)



The small barrel canteen is more of a small liquid container with bands of wood or metal at each end. I don't believe this pattern was contracted by the quartermaster department, but they were a common container of the period and thus placed into service by their accessibility.

The "W" or "VV" marking is found on various items of the period and believed to be some form of a good luck marking. This mark is found on three of the examples presented in this article. I feel confident there were not many soldiers with these initials in military service and believe it is a protective or good luck symbol.

Examples of the major patterns contracted and supplied to American troops

Figure 1. A contract wood canteen with wood interlocking hoops (JCN). This canteen has the government "U: STATES" brand that identifies it as being supplied and owned by the government. The canteen's original



Figure 1a.



Figure 1b.



Figure 2a.

owner, Joseph Cole, and his service with Virginia Troops is well documented. It is one of six known examples with the Continental brand.

Canteen features:

- Wooden body with interlocking wood hoops
- Diameter at largest point is 7¼ inches
- Width is 3¾ inches
- 10 side staves of various sizes
- Mouth piece stave is a large hole bored into a stave, with remains of a slightly raised lip or border

Markings:

- a. side U: STATES brand, letters R C
- b. side W (double V) and also the letters F I

Figure 2. A contract wood canteen with wood interlocking hoops (RKK). This canteen has the government “U: STATES” brand that identifies it as being supplied by the government. The known background information confirms it was picked up after the Battle of Crooked Billet, 1777, by Mollie McCracken and was passed down through the family until becoming part of the Richard Gordon Collection.

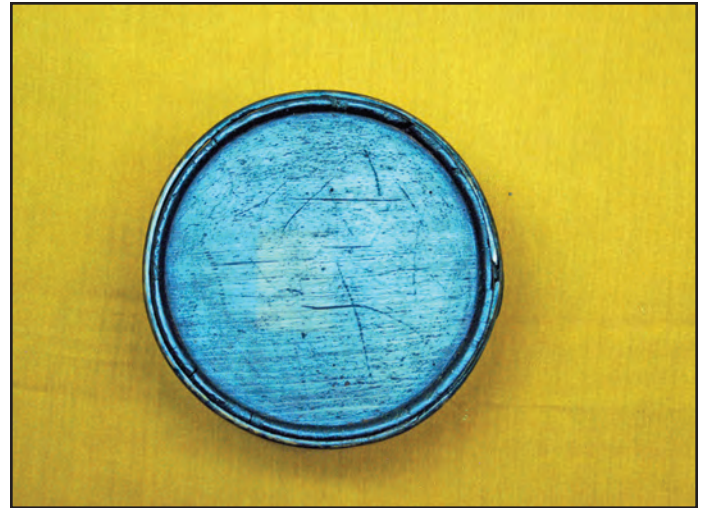


Figure 2b.

Canteen features:

- Wooden body with interlocking wood hoops
- Diameter at largest point is 7 inches
- Width is 3 inches
- 10 side staves of various sizes
- Mouth piece stave is a hole bored into a stave with a raised lip or border

Note: there is a dark black paint or sealer on the side staves and hoops that could have been applied to help seal the canteen.

Markings:

- a. side U: STATES brand
- b. side no identified letters

Figure 3. A contract-style wood canteen with wood interlocking hoops (JCN).

Canteen features:

- Wooden body with interlocking wood hoops
- Diameter at largest point is 7¼ inches
- Width is 3¾ inches



Figure 3a.



Figure 3b.

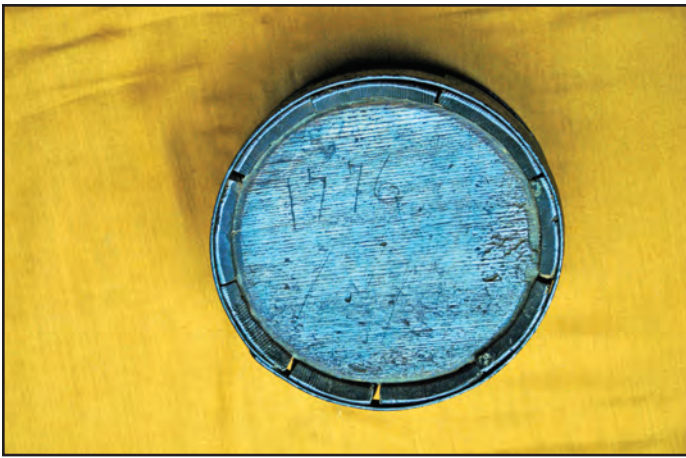


Figure 4a.



Figure 4b.

- 12 side staves of various sizes
- Mouth piece is a raised carved mouth piece stave with a hole bored into it

Markings:

- a. side large 1776 and H G
- b. side W (double V) and 1 B/P (1st Pennsylvania Battalion)

Research on this canteen with the initials “HG” and the carved “BP” markings led us to find that there was only one individual with the initials “HG” in the 1st Battalion of Pennsylvania during the early stages of the Revolution. We can thus attribute the artifact to a Henry Gardener, of Captain Jonathan Jones’ Company.

He (Gardener) appears later as a transfer to Captain John Steel’s Company of the Light Corps in 1780. He was discharged following the Pennsylvania mutiny in 1781. He then shows up in a 10th Regiment of Militia in 1781 and 1782.

Figure 4. A contract-style wood canteen with two heavy metal bands for hoops (JCN). The canteen’s owner, based on the attached tag, was Ammi R. Bradbury of the 4th Massachusetts Regiment.

Canteen features:

- Wooden body with 2 heavy metal hoops (heavier than 19th century examples)
- Diameter at largest point is 6¾ inches
- Width is ¾ inches
- 10 side staves of various sizes
- Mouth piece is a raised carved mouth piece stave with a hole bored into it

Markings:

- a. side 1776
- b. side Old ID paper tag attached

Figure 5. A contract-style wood canteen with wood interlocking hoops (RKK). This canteen is slightly smaller than the previous examples, but is typical and shows the tolerance found in hand-manufactured materials of the 18th century. What is truly unique is the original stopper which is a carved wood tompion (musket plug) with the bottom section fitting into the canteen. It is carved like a clothespin with the split end allowing it to stay in place. Original Revolutionary War tompions did not survive. This is a truly remarkable, if not a one of a kind item.

Canteen features:

- Wooden body with interlocking wood hoops
- Diameter at largest point is 5¾ inches
- Width is 3 inches
- 12 side staves of various sizes
- Mouth piece is a raised carved mouth piece stave with a hole bored into it

Markings:

- a. side 1775 & letters
- b. side letters “I A”



Figure 5a.



Figure 5b. Revolutionary War tompon.



Figure 5c.

Figure 6. A contract-style wood canteen of the “Cheese Box” pattern (RKK). This example conforms to other known examples of the cheese box construction with period carved markings or documentation to the American Revolution. In addition, most of the examples examined by the authors have wire loops to hold a rope cord rather than flat leather loops constructed to retain a leather strap. The 18th century examples are made with thicker wood components than the more common 19th century patterns.

Canteen features:

- Wooden body with large single wood stave bent around both side pieces

- Diameter at largest point is 7 inches
- Width is 3 inches
- One large curved panel
- Mouth piece is a hole bored into the wood band

Markings:

- a. side 1775 W (double V) & letter S (all done twice)
- b. side W (double V) & S

Note: This example has the described wire loops for a cord suspension and also the remains of four narrow leather loops. This indicates that an owner preferred a leather strap and modified the canteen for the strap.



Figure 6a.



Figure 6b.