

DISCOVERIES IN AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR INSIGNIA

by Nick Manganiello

In a packed basement in northern New York state a collector of just about anything a garage sale could surrender picked up a small brass object to show me. He described how it was found on a farm near Saratoga Battlefield and explained that it was a rare toy trivet for an early dollhouse. The object, sitting flat on its three supporting feet, revealed a crown over a pierced brass circle with the letters GR. Eventually I was able to obtain the “toy trivet,” properly identify it as a British cartridge box plate, and at the same time trigger a lifelong obsession to discover the various insignia that were being worn during the fight for independence. Now, forty years after my first discovery, I can look back at the scope of what’s been found in British, German, French and Loyalist insignia and in contrast, realize the massive void where American insignia should have been.

Only a few tantalizing clues have been passed down on what American insignia from the Revolutionary War era may have looked like. Paintings of patriots show the use of belt plates and belt tips often without enough detail to decipher them. Descriptions and visual clues give us just a tiny glimpse into what possibly once existed. Brass hat plates marked “Freedom” worn by Col. Alexander Hamilton’s New York City Foresters. Other units were described wearing “Oswago [sic] Rangers,” “Liberty or Death,” “God and Our Right,” and “Liberty, Property, and all America.”²

Whether Americans produced very little and/or they practiced the British method of returning belt and cartridge box plates for scrap when they were superseded, isn’t known.³ This article will attempt to bring to light three of these rare survivors of American insignia.

IH & Liberty Cartridge Box Plates

At an auction in 2005 there appeared an unusual brass plate with a large pierced IH and engraved typography which spelled out “*IH & Liberty 1775*” when read together (Figure 1). Also engraved on the brass plate were a smaller set of initials. Over the next 15 years, four additional plates of similar construction and typography would be discovered, each with a different set of smaller initials next to the large pierced IH (Figures 2-4 and 6). Two of the plates were in excavated condition, but only one with any provenance as to



Figure 1. EM 1775 Cartridge Box Plate. Ebenezer Metcalf – 8th Connecticut Regiment (Huntington’s) in 1775¹⁰ (Photo courtesy of Cowan’s Auctions).

where it was recovered. The plates were originally fastened by three brass tongues each holed for securing it with a strip of leather or wire (Figure 2). The same style brass tongues are found on British and German cartridge box plates of the revolutionary period. The thickness of the IH plates made them more likely for cartridge boxes as well, as the weight would help hold down the leather flap to protect the cartridges inside. In similar fashion to the British openwork cartridge box plates a red cloth may have been placed behind the pierced IH so the letters would be pronounced.

The next was the hunt for what unit used these plates and specifically what the IH stood for. Regiments as well as names of colonels that existed in 1775 were researched for possible matches as during this early phase of the revolution regiments were often referred to by the colonel’s name. The wealth of the colonel was another important consideration, as following British regulations regimental engraving and/or bespoke insignia were at the expense of the colonel. This was an out of pocket that not every colonel could afford.



Figure 2. JS Jr 1775 Cartridge Box Plate (65mm x 67mm; left). Joseph Shaw Jr. – 8th Connecticut Regiment (Huntington’s) in 1775.¹⁰ Reverse showing three brass tongues (right)



Figure 3. DW 1775 Cartridge Box Plate. David Ward – 8th Connecticut Regiment (Huntington’s) in 1775.¹⁰ (Photo courtesy of MAJ Stephen Kent, USA Ret. Collection).



Figure 4. LB 1775 Cartridge Box Plate (67mm x 70mm). Found in two pieces on property originally owned by Jacob Blackmar in Thompson, Connecticut. Possibly owned by Levi Blackmar, a relative of Jacob’s, who lived in the adjoining town of Woodstock, Connecticut. Levi is listed for 3 days of service at the Lexington alarm but no further information of service has been found to this point.¹¹ Interestingly Levi bought land in Killingly in 1789.¹² It may be at this time that the plate was discarded or lost.

During an exhaustive search only one regiment seemed to encompass all the evidence and make it the likely contender. While you wish there existed a single document to prove a theory, we’re often left with a confluence of supporting theories that culminate into a logical conclusion. That collection of evidence led to the conclusion the plates belonged to Huntington’s Regiment commanded by Col. Jedediah Huntington of Connecticut. Let’s look at a breakdown of the relevant facts.

The large pierced IH

During the 18th century the letter “I” was equally exchangeable for the letter “J”. It also appears that IH was already being used within the family. Jedediah’s brother, who shares his same initials, Joshua Huntington, had barrels of indigo, flour, beef and rum marked IH to indicate his ownership as they were being shipped to him.⁴

The slogan IH & Liberty

Prior to and during the American Revolution defenders of human liberties often had their names linked with Liberty. William Pitt, our advocate in Parliament who opposed the Stamp Act in 1765, was toasted in taverns throughout the colonies (Figure 5). “Pitt and Liberty Forever” would become a common toast, and when a liberty pole was raised in New York City it was capped with “The King, Pitt & Liberty.” When John Wilkes wrote about the tyranny of King George III in issue 45 of the North Briton, “Wilkes & Liberty” became a calling cry of the Sons of Liberty and was engraved on the famed Liberty Bowl made by Paul Revere.

Jedediah was an established leader of the Sons of Liberty in Norwich, Connecticut a decade before the war broke out. As part of the Norwich Militia Company, he held the rank of colonel when hostilities began in 1775.⁵



Figure 5. Pitt and Liberty English Delft Bowl . Produced in the period of the Stamp Act (1765-1766).

1775 and 1776 dates

When the Connecticut Assembly ordered the creation of the 8th Connecticut Regiment in 1775 they gave the command to Colonel Huntington and they participated at the Siege of Boston. Known as Huntington’s Regiment it was reorganized in 1776 for service in the Continental Army and renamed the 17th Continental Regiment. During the battle of Long Island, Colonel Huntington became severely ill and the 17th Continental Regiment was combined with the Pennsylvania Regiment under General Parsons. The regiment was surrounded during the engagement and taken prisoner. The 17th Continental Regiment would never be rebuilt.⁶ On May 12th of 1777 Jedediah Huntington would be promoted to Brigadier General.⁷ Huntington’s Regiment only existed in 1775 and 1776, the only two dates on the known plates. Also, the 1776 dated plate being larger than the 1775 examples, dispels the earlier date as being commemorative. (Figure 6)

Cost of the plates

Jedediah was born into a wealthy family. His father, Jabez Huntington, owned a fleet of trading ships. Colonel Jedediah Huntington was considered a “spit-and-polish commander who made sure his men were well-trained, uniformed and equipped.”⁸ So not only did he have the means to purchase these plates, they became a reflection of his own standard for perfection.

Known provenance

Of the five known plates, two are excavated. Fortunately, one still retained the provenance as to where it was found. (Figure 4) The plate was dug at a foundation site in the town of Thompson, Windham County, Connecticut. Thompson was known as Killingly in the 18th century and is located in the state’s northeastern corner. In 1775 Colonel Huntington recruited mostly in New London, Hartford and Windham counties.⁶



Figure 6. ST 1776 Cartridge Box Plate (76mm x 78mm). Samuel Tolman – 17th Continental Regiment (Huntington’s) in 1776.¹⁰

There appears to be evidence of two different engravers on each plate. The large pierced IH, date, ampersand and Liberty appear to have been made together and later engraved with the soldier’s initials when the cartridge boxes were issued.

One possible engraver of the plates is Roswell Huntington. Roswell Huntington was apprenticed to Norwich, Connecticut silversmith Joseph Carpenter. The silversmith shop was opposite the store of Roswell’s relative, Jedediah Huntington. While Roswell was only 13 when the war broke out it didn’t stop him from enlisting in the 3rd Connecticut Regiment from May to December 1775 and reportedly took part in the defense of New London.⁹ It may have been Roswell Huntington or Joseph Carpenter, or both, that Jedediah Huntington commissioned to engrave these plates.

The “Death or Glory” Cap Plates

Another survivor of American insignia is a slightly convex, thin brass oval cap plate engraved with an officer’s initials, “Lieut IB”, the date “1775”, a Latin motto “Vel Mors Vel Gloria”, regiment, “9:REG” and a cut out and engraved crown at the top (Figure 7). The reverse shows a brass tongue drilled with a round hole at the end. As mentioned earlier, 18th century British and German cartridge box plates utilized the same style tongue to be slipped through a cut in thick material, such as leather, and secured the plate in position by placing a leather or metal strip through the hole. The second tongue on this plate had broken off and was replaced with a make-do rose head nail to secure the plate in position. The crown, which seems counter to the cap plate being American was not an unusual symbol for Americans to use this early in the war. Reconciliation with Britain was still expected, as our quarrel was seen to be with Parliament and not our allegiance to King George III. This would quickly change by the middle of 1776 when independence was declared and royal symbols were fully abandoned. The Latin motto translated to “Death or Glory” which couldn’t be linked to any specific American unit.

When first discovered, I was convinced through decades of handling 18th century American and English antiques, that the cap plate was not only of the period but more importantly of American



Figure 7. Lt. IB Cap Plate (121mm x 84mm). Lieutenant James Blodget – 2nd Lieutenant of Col. Daniel Brewer’s 9th Continental Regiment (May-December, 1775).⁷



Figure 8. Capt ID Cap Plate.
 Captain Jonathan Danforth –
 in Col. Daniel Brewer’s
 9th Continental Regiment
 (May-December, 1775)
 Captain 6th Continental Infantry
 (January-December, 1776).⁷

Reverse showing the one bent,
 but intact, brass tongue.
 (Private collection)



manufacture. Research at the time focused on identifying states with at least 9 regiments as early as 1775, and if I could match the Lieutenant’s initials to a muster roll. At the time I identified the 9th Massachusetts Bay Provincial Regiment of 1775 as the likely candidate. Within the officer’s rolls, three names matched the Lieutenant rank and the initials IB or JB. Without additional information I was unable to advance further, at least for the moment, and the plate went into a collection drawer and sat until recently when a second partial plate was excavated at a house site in western Massachusetts (Figure 8). This newly dug plate was nearly identical showing only the expected variations due to hand engraving. The officer’s rank and initials on the plate were marked “*Capt ID*”. There’s about 20% broken off the right side of the plate and a cleaner cut is seen at the top where the crown appears to have been purposely removed. Armed with two different officers’ initials it was time to re-examine which unit wore these distinctive cap plates. My initial research had been correct in targeting Massachusetts but did not identify the correct regiment. Both officers were in fact part of the 9th Continental Regiment, a redesignation of the 20th Massachusetts Bay Provincial Regiment.

The partial cap plate belonged to Captain Jonathan Danforth of Massachusetts (Figure 8). In 1775, Captain Danforth raised a company of men, including his two sons, from Western (now Warren), Massachusetts and marched to Boston where they participated in the Battle of Bunker Hill. From April 24, 1775 he is listed as a Captain in Colonel David Brewer’s Regiment. Captain Danforth contracted small pox while in Boston but must have recovered as he continued to serve in Colonel Brewer’s Regiment through the Siege of Boston.¹³ It was at this time that his cap plate was likely crafted and issued. On January 1, 1776 he became a Captain in Colonel Asa Whitcomb’s 6th regiment.¹⁴ Sometime that year he left the service and bought a farm in Williamstown, Massachusetts. This would be the final move he would make but not his last participation in the Revolutionary War. Captain Jonathan Danforth would again raise a company of men and participate at the Battle of Bennington in 1777.¹⁵

The complete cap plate belonged to Lieutenant James Blodget of Monson, Massachusetts (Figure 7). Records show he served throughout the French and Indian War. On the Lexington alarm

of April 19, 1775 he marched as Sergeant in Captain Freeborn Moulton's Company, Colonel Timothy Danielson's regiment. On April 24, 1775 he enlisted as Ensign, and received his commission June 17, 1775 in Colonel David Brewer's regiment.¹⁴ He's listed as a 2d Lieutenant of Brewer's Massachusetts Regiment from May until December 1775.⁷ Further research may bring additional family and military history to life.

The 20th Massachusetts Bay Provincial Regiment was commanded by Colonel David Brewer of Palmer. Colonel Brewer would be tried at a Court Marshal for, among other charges, procuring a Lieutenant's commission for his teenage son and paying him even though the son was actually home, and dismissed from the service on October 24, 1775.¹⁶ The next senior officer, Lieutenant Colonel Rufus Putnam, assumed command of the regiment and served until the end of the year. In August 1775, the regiment was designated the 9th Continental Regiment. The 9th participated in the Siege of Boston and was disbanded at the end of 1775. The 9th Continental Regiment would be folded into the 13th Continental Regiment in 1776. Considering the 9th Continental Regiment existed for only several months it's not known how long these plates would have been worn.



Figure 9. TS/ Edisto Island/ South Carolina belt plate (48mm x 65mm). Engraved in two lines with "Edisto Island, South Carolina".

A South Carolina Belt Plate

At a construction site in Charleston, South Carolina two brass plates were unearthed, both relics of the Siege of Charleston. From March 29 to May 12, 1780 Americans under General Benjamin Lincoln tried to hold off a British and Loyalist force twice their size. The outcome was inevitable, and the surrender became the greatest American loss of the entire war with over five thousand killed, wounded or captured, including huge stores of munitions. The first plate was a 33rd Regiment of Foot belt plate, one of the British regiments that besieged Charleston. The second plate was an incredible surprise. A brass cross belt plate engraved across its face in two lines that read "Edisto Island, South Carolina" (Figure 9). Research revealed that Edisto Island, located southwest of Charleston, had a volunteer militia during the Revolution. The militia, the Edisto Island Volunteers, was organized among residents of the island prior to the war. By August of 1775 they were listed as having two sergeants and 95 privates. The Edisto Island Volunteer Militia were incorporated as a company of the Colleton County Regiment of Foot.¹⁷ The Colleton County Regiment was commanded by Colonel Joseph Glover and participated at the Siege of Charleston, which may explain why the plate was found there.¹⁸

Edisto Island was the site of a skirmish during September of 1782. The American militia captured and burned two British ships. The militia was pursued by a British landing party but were able to drive the British to retreat. Afterward it became known as the Battle of Edisto Island.¹⁹

The construction of the plate appeared to be of British manufacture due to its size and the supporting studs and hook, which were adhered by piercing the face of the plate. It may have been an earlier British capture and ground smooth before being engraved by an American. While part of the plate's surface above the engraving had an area of corrosion, a closer look revealed a set of engraved initials: TS. Only one name matched them, Thomas Skinner, who enlisted on 2nd October, 1775 in the Edisto Island Volunteer Militia under Capt. Joseph Jenkins.²⁰ In 1775 their uniform is described with a blue coat with white cuffs and lapel, white breeches and waistcoat, and a fan-tail hat.²¹

These rare artifacts of the Revolution shed just a little light to what may have existed. Hopefully through future excavations and/or discoveries buried away in a Historical Society's basement we'll be able to add to our understanding of the material culture which encompass American revolutionary insignia.

Endnotes

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