

The Militia and Munitions of the Revolution

by: Harmon C. Leonard

“Success in war depends on the organization and application of its military resources.” (Military Policy of the U.S. — Upton 1803)

By the year 1775 the vast majority of people in the 13 American colonies were 3rd., 4th., and 5th. generation native born Americans. With the exception of those living in the major coastal cities, ie., Boston, New York, Philadelphia, they had very little intercourse with the mother country. Except for a common language and political and religious heritage the similarities became increasingly diverse as the migration moved inland.

Of the thirteen colonies only two, Connecticut and Rhode Island, elected their own governors. The rest were royal appointments, individuals usually aloof from the largely agrarian society.

The individually quartered colonies had little economic or political intercourse and not until the appearance of a common enemy (the Indian in 1670, and the French and Indians in 1757) did they have any cause to unite in mutual defense. The first record of a draft I found is recorded in the history of Wallingford, Connecticut, in the year 1675. “That every man bring his arms and ammunition complete upon ye Sabbath day that he may be able in a fit posture to do service if need require”. Such assemblies were called periodically, semi-annually, monthly or as deemed necessary dependent on the security of the society. These, in most instances, especially New England, were largely social events.

With the outbreak of the French and Indian War the colonies had a common enemy. They united under the rallying call of the English to drive the Papist French from the continent. Then 15 years later these same colonists were eager to enlist their Papist Brethren to free the continent from the English.

Most of the military leadership of the War of Independence was learned from the experience of the campaigns of this war. The breakdown of inter-colonial barriers, the comradery of these mutual experiences were in reality the making of the United Colonies and the United States.

The expenses incurred by the French and Indian War were a great burden to the people in England and many in Britain felt that the rich colonists who lived relatively free of taxes should help pay for this war and the protection it had given them.

Early in 1774 several of the colonies started preparation for conflict over the matter of these taxes. In Massachusetts the colonial assembly countermanded the Royal governor's order and resolved itself in a Provincial Congress. It adopted organization for the Militia and named Committees of Safety and Committees of Supplies.

The second Provincial Congress met in 1775 and reaffirmed these acts. One third of the militia called itself minutemen and agreed to hold themselves in readiness to march at a minute's warning.



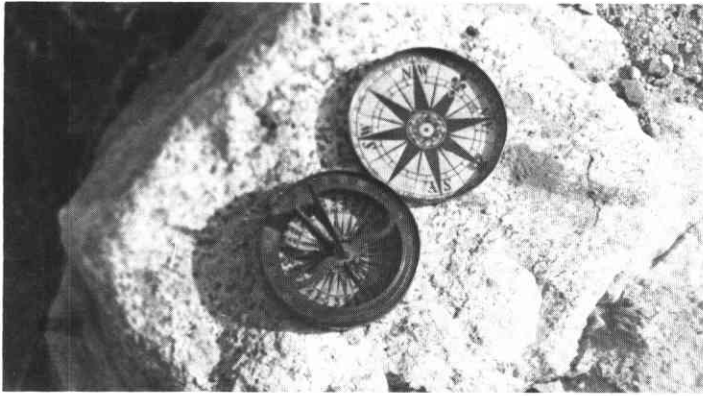
The Massachusetts troops were organized by giving a Captain's commission to anyone who could enroll a company of 59 men and a Colonel's commission to lead ten such companies.

One of the amazing events of the War evolves around the fact that this half organized, poorly trained rabble of men which only by courtesy recognized a common commander, fought the Battle of Bunker Hill in which 1054 British soldiers, including 85 officers, were killed or wounded. The number of casualties was half again greater than that sustained in any subsequent battle of the war.

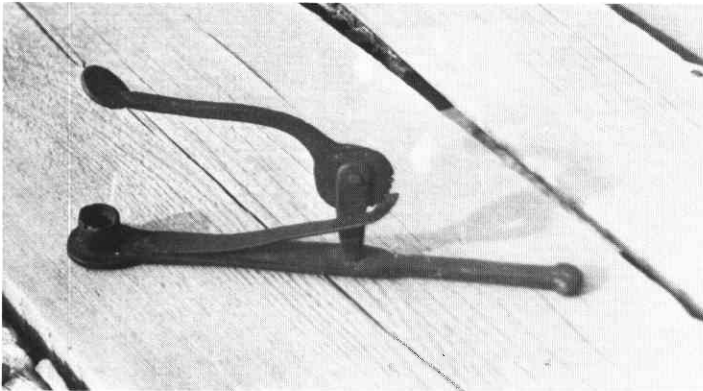
This spectacular action, although a technical defeat, caused a mistaken conviction in the minds of general public that the militia was invincible, and that patriotism was the most important qualification for military victory. This fallacy frequently jeopardized the outcome of the war by inducing Congress to rely too heavily on raw and untrained troops.

It soon became evident that this war would not be confined to New England and in June the second Continental Congress resolved that George Washington be appointed Commander-in-Chief of the entire American forces. If any act of Congress in the cause of Independence had Divine guidance, certainly this appointment was it.

The problem that plagued this great man made the decision of Ulysses seem simple. Supplies of food, munitions, arms, clothing, were sadly wanting. Organization was completely lacking. None of the men under his command in 1775 were enlisted to serve after December 31, 1775 and the short enlistment problem was to plague him for several years. He was constantly watching one army dwindle away while trying to enlist another.



Compass and Sun Dial



Hand Forged Powder Tester



Phlegm — Bleeding Instrument



Portable Camp Stove

Congress had resolved that the army around Boston should not exceed 22,000 men. By the 19th of November 1775, with all enlistments to expire in five weeks, only 966 men had enlisted for 1776. By December 15 the number had reached 5900. In his letters to Congress, Washington blames these short enlistments as the cause of the death of General Montgomery and probable cause of the failure of the Canadian invasion. The entire force under Montgomery and Arnold was due to muster out the first of the year, and the order to attack was given based on this fact and not from a military consideration.

On June 4, 1776 Washington wrote "to maintain a post against the flower of the British troops for six months without powder, and have one army disband and another raised within the same distance of a reinforced enemy is too much to attempt".

This skeletal army was supplemented by militia. This patchwork plugging of the gap in the Continental Army with militia had several advantages: they could be quickly called, and need not be supported when not in service as would a standing army, while British must feed, house and pay their troops and mercenaries 365 days a year, whether in active service or not. The disadvantages were heavy: the militia could only be called with the consent of their state assemblies and could not be sent out of state without their approval; active service was usually short — 1 to 6 month average. Training and discipline was minimal; officers were elected by the men and popularity rather than military consideration frequently prevailed.

The militia, as the war progressed, was poorly armed and equipped. After the defeat of the Battle of Long Island and before the Battle of White Plains, Washington complained in a bitter letter to Congress of a regiment of Connecticut militia had been called into service. They arrived without arms, powder, kettles, blankets or tents. When their enlistment expired one month later, they left taking guns, powder, kettles, blankets and tents. "Better they should have staid in Connecticut."

In spite of its shortcomings, the militia did play an important factor in many of the crucial battles of the war among them Saratoga, Bennington, Trenton, Cowpen and Yorktown.

It was not until three months after the Declaration of Independence that Congress resolved to enlist an army for the duration, a total of 88 battalions. It offered bounty of \$20 plus 100 acres of land for each soldier, and a bounty of land for all officers.

Even with this inducement, in January, 1777, facing 20,000 British veterans around New York, Washington has less than 3,000 men and of these only 1,000 had equipment and were fit for duty. When Howe was preparing to move from New York, Washington called for the New Jersey militia. Not one company responded.

Early in the war Washington and Congress were obsessed with the idea that the French in Canada would come flocking to the American cause. In many of his letters in '75 and '76 the subject of enlisting French Canadians is frequently mentioned. He also had several visita-

tions from Indians, mostly Iroquois, and actively sought their support.

On July 8, 1776 when he first learned that the British were hiring German mercenaries, he wrote Congress and suggested that they resolve to raise a regiment of German Americans "to counteract the design of our enemy". He recommended John David Wilpert to be commissioned Colonel of this body. "He was a member of my Virginia forces in 1754. He is a German, an active, vigilant, brave officer".

The problem of nurses for the military hospitals was demonstrated to Congress in a letter September 14, 1776. "Nurses should be paid \$1 a week, they cannot be had for less". He had to assign men for nursing duties from the regiments, and they were of little use, and by so doing a soldier was lost to his regiment.

With the failure of the bounty system and volunteer enlistment, individual states late in 1777 started drafting men.

One of Washington's problems was an over-abundance of foreign volunteers, largely French, all of them requesting commission of high rank in the American Army. "This evil, if I may call it so, is a growing one, for from what I learn, they are coming in swarms from old France and the Islands. Their ignorance of our language and their inability to recruit men are insurmountable obstacles to their being ingrafted into our Continental battalions".

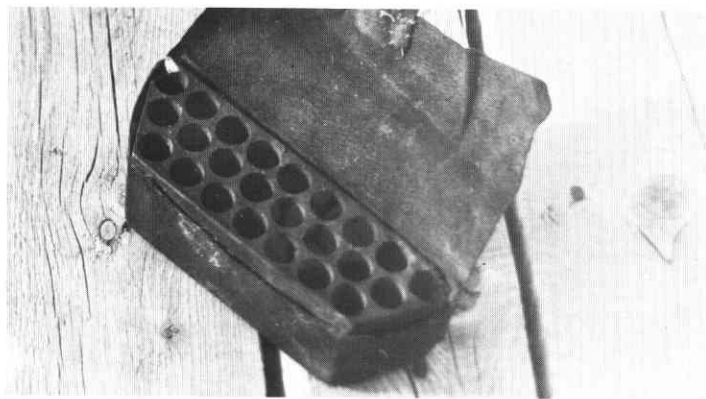
Money was always short — the troops were rarely paid on time. Inflation was a constant problem, with merchants and traders who set up near army posts charging exorbitant prices. Congress kept printing money not backed by substance, which became practically worthless. Laws were passed — but difficult to enforce — making it a crime to refuse to accept continental currency at its face value; from whence the expression "not worth a continental".

Speaking of payment for military service, one of the early problems of Washington when he took command of the militia forces around Boston concerned the demand for payment of the Massachusetts troops. They asked to be paid on a lunar month (28 days) while the Rhode Island and Connecticut forces were paid on a calendar month.

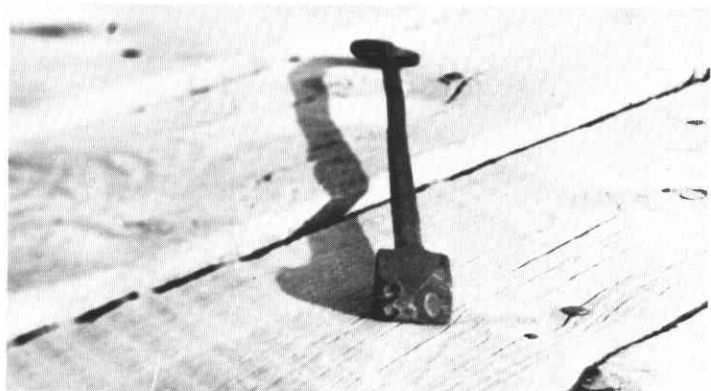
After the retreat of the British forces back into Boston following the battles of Lexington and Concord, General Gage ordered confiscation of all private guns in Boston: about 2,500 small arms were collected. Their disposition is unknown; probably most were destroyed.

The militia each reported with their own arms. The Connecticut assembly in 1776 ordered 3,000 muskets patterned after the 1st model Brown Bess at the next session — 6 months later less than 100 had been delivered because of a lack of gunsmiths, so an additional bounty was given to each man enlisting and bringing his own musket suitably fitted for attachment of a bayonet.

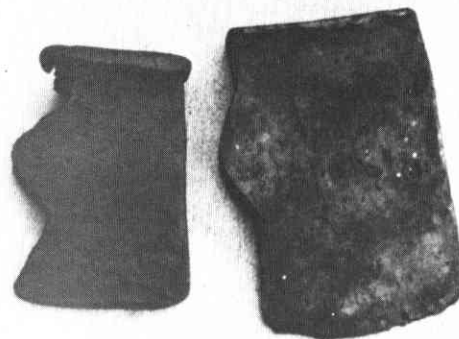
In Lancaster, Pennsylvania the makers of rifles were requested to sign an agreement that for a period of one year they would not make rifles, but concentrate on the manufacture of muskets.



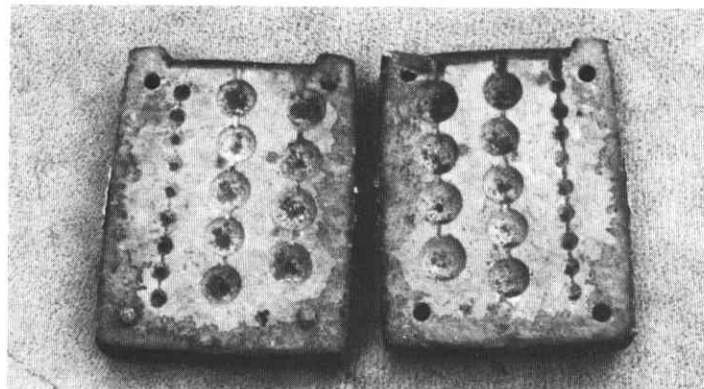
Cartridge Box



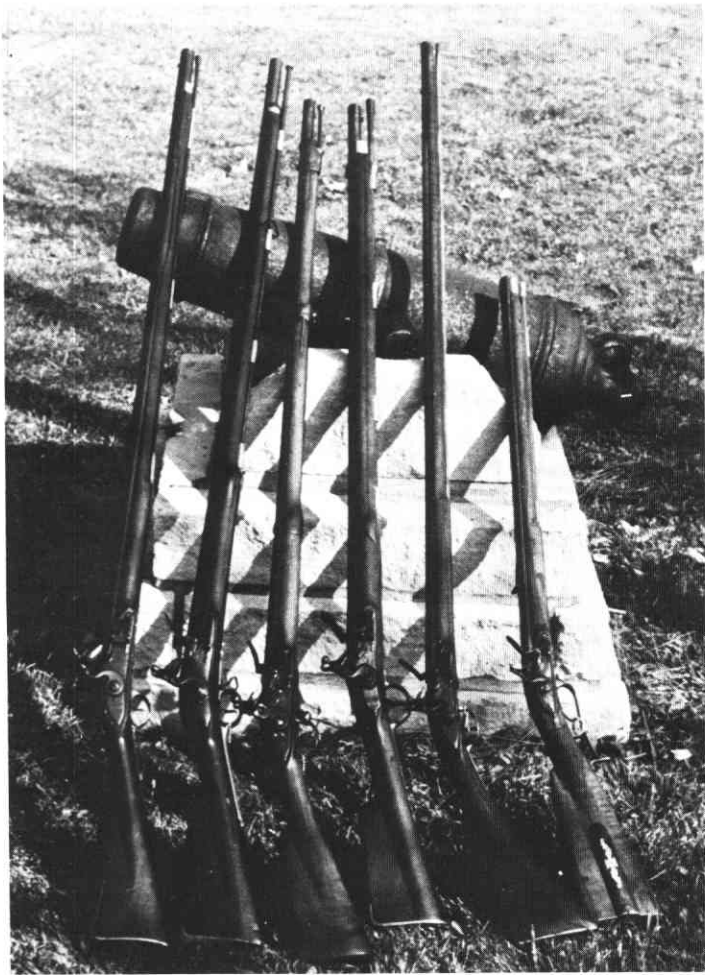
Branding Iron SC (State Conn.)



Axe Heads



Stone Bullet Mould



Muskets Supplied by Militiamen



"Horse Pistols" and Holster

Much is read and reported about the riflemen of the Revolutionary War, but in reality the rifle had limited use in the mode of battle as fought in most engagements. Its chief disadvantage lay in the time required to reload. A trained infantryman with a smooth bore musket could fire about three times as rapidly as a rifleman. Nor were rifles equipped to accommodate a bayonet.

In the early months of the war, American forces relied heavily on the captured British arms and ammunition to deep their forces armed. Within two weeks of the Battle of Lexington a fast sailing ship left for the West Coast of Africa and returned with three tons of badly needed powder. Dr. David Ramsey reports this in his contemporary writing, but fails to give the source in West Africa.

The matter of sheltering his new command was partially met by Washington in an early order: the sails of ships in the Charles River were commandeered and made into tents.

It was very evident to the leaders of the rebellion that this would be a long war and that the need of arms and ammunition could be critical. Nine days after the Battle of Lexington, 300 pounds Sterling was secretly taken from the treasury of Connecticut without knowledge of the assembly, and 15 days later additional 510 pounds, more was taken. For this, five members of the committee of safety gave their promissory note in secrecy. This money was used for the clandestine action of Colonel Ethan Allen to take an expedition to capture Fort Ticonderoga and take possession of its arms and ammunition. The fact that Connecticut had an elected governor and not a royal appointed one made for a much quicker transition in putting that state on a war alert and to take immediate positive action.

This quick action of the Connecticut militia under the joint leadership of Benedict Arnold and Ethan Allen netted the infant rebel army:

- 120 cannons
- 2-10" mortar
- 50 swivel guns
- 10 ton musket balls
- 100 stand of arms
- 2 brass cannons
- 10 casks of powder
- 48 prisoners of war, brought to Hartford for confinement.

As a colonial policy, Great Britain had discouraged the development of American industries. Iron foundries essential as a war industry, were particularly few. In Salisbury, Connecticut, a small iron foundry was owned but not operated by a loyalist, Richard Smith, who quickly fled to join the British in Boston. The Connecticut assembly voted to confiscate it and start to cast cannon. Here for the duration of the war, artillery for the army and navy was cast.

The first evidence I have found of a military deferment was granted for men considered essential at the foundry on December 18, 1776. The General Assembly appointed Colonel Porter commander of the iron works and author

zed exemptions from military duty for anyone lawfully engaged there. 59 men were employed at this time.

The largest cannon cast in Salisbury were 32 pounders, with many naval cannon weighing over one ton.

The proof testing was described as using 4/5 of the weight of the shot as a proof load of powder (normal charge was 1/2 the weight of the shot).

For proving a cannon the charge was fired. The mouth of the barrel was covered, and the thumb placed over the touch hole: if no smoke came through any part of the metal the barrel was passed.

To check the bore, sunlight was reflected with a mirror, or a long stock with a candle was passed down the barrel. The barrel was struck with an iron hammer "and if you shall with any stroke hear a hoarse sound then there is honey combing, but if in striking ye piece you shall at every stroke hear a clear sound then you may be sure your piece is free of honey combing and cracks and flaws". (Salisbury, Conn. Cannon, Middlebrook)

The match for the cannon was made of tow twisted into strands as large as the little finger, then boiled in lye ashes and saltpeter. When dried it was lashed to the end of the instock.

Washington recommended to Congress in a letter of November 17, 1777 that the need for artillery was great, and suggested "at least #100, 3 pound, #50, 6 pound and #50-12 pound cannon. This is in addition to those we now have — also some 18 and 24 pounders — the whole should be of brass as it is not half so liable to burst and can be recast if needed".

Gun powder was another essential in short supply. In 1776 there were three powder mills in Connecticut, in Windham, East Hartford, and New Haven.

The ingredients of black powder are saltpeter, charcoal and sulfur. I have found little in reference to the source of sulfur (brimstone) except that it was shipped in from the South, apparently from deposits in Louisiana. Saltpeter was leached from soil in barn yards under manure piles, and from the soil under the common privy. It was a cash commodity and the thrifty Yankees sold it to the state.

Three weeks before the Battle of Trenton December 4, 1776, Washington wrote "the great want of powder is what the attention of Congress should be particularly applied to. I dare not attempt anything offensive. I have not more of that most essential article than absolutely necessary to defend our lives should the enemy attack".

Throughout the entire war the lack of a strong central government was the major weakness. The concept of a united country without sectional jealousies and friction was slow in emerging — for example, on May 5, 1776 Colonel Wayne of Pennsylvania wrote to Washington telling him that the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety in Philadelphia "has not less than two to three thousand stand of arms for Provincial use" and suggest that Congress borrow these. Washington wrote to Congress that day: "Colonel Ritzen at the Fort in the Highlands has only 97 firelocks and seven bayonets. I question the propriety of keeping arms in store when men in actual pay are in want of them.

I have therefore thoughts of employing agents to ride through the middle and interior parts of these governments for the purpose of buying us such arms as the inhabitants may be inclined to sell and are fit for use".

Added to the problem of Washington other than men, ammunition, military campaigns, enlistments, pay policy, even the trivial problem were not diverted from him: August 19, 1776 — "Captain Van Buren is in Connecticut and has procured sufficient supply of sail cloth for the vessels to be employed on the lake".

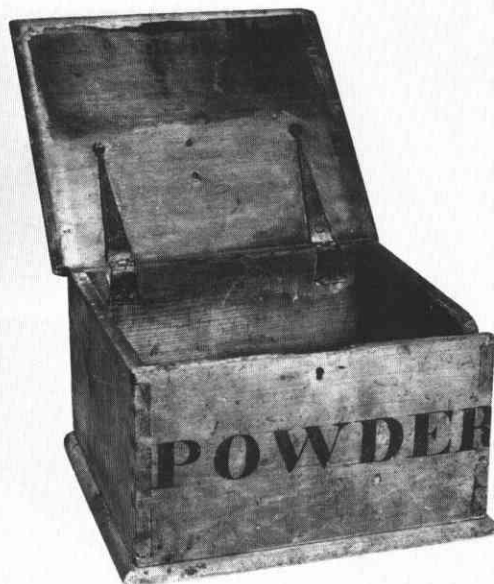
General Gates, who felt and acted aloof from Washington's command, wrote to ask the Commander-in-Chief for musket cartridge paper "and would he please have it sent to him from Philadelphia".

The day before the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, July 3, 1776, he wrote to Congress. "I must entreat your attention to an application for flints. We are extremely deficient in this necessary article; of lead we have a sufficient quantity for the whole campaign taken off the houses here".

In the bitter winter of 1777 while in camp in New Jersey, Washington wrote to Congress — "nearly 1000 men are in the hospital and unfit for duty but not from disease but nakedness." Supplies during the entire war were always in short supply. The major miracle of the War for Independence was the persistence of Washington in holding together a semblance of an army. Here in this relatively rich land of prosperous, well-fed farmers, his army starved and suffered bitterly for lack of clothes, blankets, tents, cooking utensils, and all manner of medical needs.

The munitions of war were even more wanting. With the alliance of the French in 1778, many of these problems of supply improved, but victory was to evade this rag-tag army for nearly four more years.

Driving across the country I saw a bumper sticker. It read "this country was founded on God, guns and guts". I think this pretty well says it all.



Wallingford July 5th 1700

Please to pay, Four hundred fifty seven pounds ten shillings lawfull Money, it being the Bounty ordered by Act of the general Assembly in their last Session, and by an Act of the Governor and Council of Safety, since the rising of the General Assembly; for the inlisting sixty one Men within my Regiment, for the continental Battalions to serve six Months.

And three hundred and six pounds lawfull money it being the Bounty ordered by an Act of the General Assembly in their last Session for the inlisting sixty eight Men within my Regt to serve three Months under his Excellency General Washington.

$$\begin{array}{r} \$ 306.0 \\ \$ 457.10 \\ \hline \$ 763.10 \end{array}$$

To the Committee
of Pay Table
Hartford.

Thad: Cook Esq

Gentlemen

Please to pay the above Sum to
the Bearer Maj Isaac Cook Junr.
Thad: Cook Esq

1781 State of Connecticut
To Cheshire Select Men

To Amount of Arms Blankets & furnished the Recruits
for Storjencuk as a certificate enclosed

To 6 Blankets at 45/ each	£ 13 " 10 " 0
6 Knapsacks a 6/	1 " 16 " 0
6 Cartridge Boxes a 4/	1 " 4 " 0
6 Guns with Bayonets a 15/	4 " 10 " 0
John Peck, List man	£ 21 " 0 " 0

Rec'd Hartford June 5th 1781 of Pay Table Committee
an Order on Treasurer for twenty one pounds in Bills of
this State in full of the above Amount
John Peck Select man

Payment for 6 — blankets, knapsacks, cartridge boxes, and guns with bayonets, furnished for recruits from Cheshire, Connecticut.

Hartford 3: April 1786.

Sir, Pay to Mr Jesse Cooke on order the sum of Twenty
pounds Lawful Money for the Premium on one hun-
dred pound weight of Salt Petre by him delivered
to the Authority & Select men of the Town of Wallingford
as per Certificate on file and Charge the same to
Colony Acct.

To John Lawrence Esq.
Treasurer &
£ 20 0 0

Feymour
Williams } Comrs

Paying Jesse Cooke premium on 100 lbs. of salt petre for manufacture of gun powder.

State of Connecticut, to the Committee of the Town of
 Mansfield. Dr for Articles of Cloathing to Supply the
 Continental Soldiers Belonging to T. Mansfield

To	84	p ^r of Show	at 30/	£ 126:00:0
To	28	p ^r of plain Overalls	at 24/	33:12:0
To	8	p ^r of Stript & Check'd Do	at 26/	10:8:0
To	24	Wool Frocks	at 30/	30:0:0
To	51	p ^r of Stockings	at 15/	38:5:0
To	24	Shirts Stript & Plain	at 38/	45:12:0
To	24	Check'd Do Do	at 40/	48:0:0
To	1	hoghead & supporting the above		£ 337:17:0

The Above is a true out of cloathing as purchased
 by the Committee

£ 337:17:0
 J. H. Math. Hall
 Elijah Marshall
 Heazer Huntington
 Joseph Stouey
 Nathl. M. S. by
 Danl. Dunham
 Committee

July 5th 1778 at Mansfield

Details of clothing and supplies furnished soldiers of Town of Mansfield, Connecticut, for Continental Army.

Hebron December the 12. A. D. 1776

I have received A gun lock of Joseph White
 of his own manufacturing and paid
 fifteen shillings which is all but the premium
 by me
 Dan Cogswell

Paying Joseph White for a gun lock of his own manufacture in Dec. 1776.