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Thomas Jefferson's Blue Coat: Style, Substance and Circumstance

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Some Examples of Jefferson's Attitude to Wardrobe and Image

Reflection in Portraiture

Jefferson was one of the architects of a new republic, ideally this would be a true egalitarian republic in every sense with no echoes of the aristocratic and monarchistic old world from which independence had been won. Proud of his role in creating and nurturing this republic, when Jefferson officially "sat" for portraits, it is clear that he chose clothing that reflected a man of the people rather than a man over the people. For example, for a man acutely aware of image, the inclusion of classical elements in the background such as Roman columns in the well-known portrait by Gilbert Stuart (circa 1805-7) reflect a typical popular style of contemporary portraiture for European aristocracy. Yet Jefferson is dressed in plain attire in complete contrast to the implied grandiosity of the background.

Contemporary Reports

Even under circumstances when etiquette pressure and fashion might have encouraged the adoption of grander attire, Jefferson stayed true to his egalitarian "man of the people" image. A prime example of this is his documented 1788 attendance at the court of Louis XVI at Versailles, representing the entire nation as the United States Minister to France. As discussed by Baumgarten, a contemporary report is one of the first to note his plain republican attire that became a signature element of his public image. Specifically, Thomas Lee Shippen who was present at Versailles wrote to William Shippen that Jefferson was, "*The plainest man in the room, and the most destitute of ribbons crosses and other insignia of rank.*" Yet he was, "*The most courted and most attended to (even by the courtiers themselves) of the whole diplomatic corps.*"¹

In His Own Words

His broader attitude to attire and the creating of image can be seen in an incredibly detailed 1783 letter to his eleven year old daughter Martha in which he lectures her on the importance of always being appropriately dressed and presented, i.e., that first impression inevitably becomes lasting impression. He wrote, "*But be you from the moment you rise to the moment till you go to bed as cleanly and properly dressed as at the hours of dinner or tea. A lady who is seen as a sloven or slut in the morning, will never efface the impression she made with all the dress and pageantry she can afterwards involve herself in.*"²

¹ Linda Baumgarten, "Homespun and Silk," in *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal*

² Linda R. Baumgarten, "Jefferson's Clothing," *The Magazine Antiques*, July 1993, pg. #100.

Examination and Analysis of Blue Coat in Monticello Collection

Description of the Coat

The subject coat is a blue frock coat that is made of one over one plain weave tabby cloth. It includes style elements from different time periods – see below, making dating a non-trivial task. Moreover, such a hodge-podge of styles is consistent with a coat intended for practical use by Jefferson, the private individual, rather than Jefferson the republic patriarch posing for posterity. In short an emphasis on function rather than form. The coat is partially lined. Some buttons have been replaced. All the buttonholes are functional and the buttons now follow a curve indicating Jefferson wore this coat buttoned. The coat is stable in good overall condition, with only a few isolated signs of wear, abrasion, and/or insect damage.

Textile Composition of the Coat

The coat for some time has been reported to be indigo-dyed linen and at a first glance the coat gives the appearance of such, which was certainly a readily available and commonly used material during the early American Republic. When the author examined the coat along with the staff members from both Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg it was agreed that the fiber of the coat's fabric was questionable and warranted further study. When carefully viewed through a microscope even at low magnification the fabric can clearly be seen to consist of a blend of light and dark fibers. At higher resolution the color difference in these fibers is even more apparent. According to experts in historical weaving, these different color saturations indicate fibers that bonded with the dye to different degrees and/or fibers that have lost color intensity by fading at distinctly different rates. Either way, the inescapable conclusion is that two different fiber types are incorporated in the in the textile.

What are the two fibers? By microscopic examination of the yarn ends in abraded edges of the cloth we can see both the scaly structure of wool fiber and the twisting ribbon appearance of cotton fiber. The cotton fibers are darker blue than those of the wool.

While fabrics of different fibers blend in the yarn, as a opposed to those that use different yarns in the weaving, are relatively uncommon in the 18th and early 19th centuries, they were not unknown. This wool/cotton conclusion is supported by several authors of the period who comment that cotton was commonly used to extend wool in the southern states, whereas linen was used for the same purpose in the northern states.³ According to Baumgarten, this was a natural consequence of the scarcity of sheep in this time in the new world, as England had jealously guarded its profitable flocks and banned the importation of good fleece bearing sheep to the early colonies.⁴ This was further exacerbated by the problems of sheep raising in southern climates that cause infestations and skin infections below thick wool. In fact there are records of such blending going back to at least 1711, as reported to the Board Of Trade in a report by Lieutenant Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia.

³ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America : The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, 96.

⁴ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America : The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, 96.

Dating of the Coat

This garment presents the costume historian with conflicting indications as to the exact period when it was made. Specifically, the high collar and the narrowness of the back in relationship to the placement of the sleeves would be expected to be found in a coat constructed in the 1790's. But the soft angle and the looseness of the sleeve definitely are indicative of a later period garment. Also, the straightness of the coat front is more commonly found on outer garments such as great coats before the 1820's when it also gained wider usage on dress garments such as this frock coat.

The author has studied and discussed cut of the coat with Colonial Williamsburg's senior Tailor and costume historian Mark Hutter. In our opinion, the best dating evidence for this coat are the shape of the armholes, the shape of the neck for collar attachment, and the sleeve shape. These features change distinctly according to the prevailing fashion in posture, silhouette and cut. As late as the 1790's, standard practice had been to point an oval shaped armhole towards the apex of the wearer. But this coat has a rotated rounded armhole, giving a looser fit. This design feature started appearing in coats circa 1815. In fact if we look at the details of the armhole and these other features in a pattern lifted from the subject coat by Jeff Hill, we see they are virtually identical to these same details in a reference frock coat pattern presented in *The Tailors Complete Guide*, 1809, Phil. By Queen and Lapsley.⁵

Repairs and Alterations to the Coat

The main repairs are to both the elbows of both sleeves using a different material than the body of the coat. These are clearly to repair wear holes indicating that this coat was heavily used over a period of time. The thread used to make these repairs is likely linen thread. The dye used to color this thread must have had a heavy iron component as revealed by what appears to be ferric (rust) oxidation of the thread.

Originally, the coat had pockets in the pleats as revealed by several details. For example, the now closed button flaps in the pleats show evidence of wear and use. Also, a small square of fabric on the lower body of the coat is a leftover component that would have supported the body of the pocket bag. There is also a hook and eye fastening on the center of the rear vent; perhaps this was used to prevent the vent from gaping when the pockets were full of contents.

The removal of the rear pockets and creation of the front pockets represent the only noticeable alteration to this garment. Very interestingly the thread used to attach the new pocket bags to the body of the coat has exactly the same appearance as the thread used in the elbow repairs.

Historical Context

Factors Influencing Movement Towards Domestic Textile and Clothing Production *Pre-Revolutionary Non-Importation Pact*

In reaction to new taxes being levied by the Parliament in London, colonists ultimately agreed to a written Non-Importation Pact. This document, signed in May 1769, precluded importation of luxury

⁵ Mark Hutter, "Coat Construction of Late 18th and Early 19th Century," interview by author, July 2012.

goods, including fabrics, over a certain price point. Thus the first formal movement towards self-sufficiency in manufactured goods such as textiles took the form of protest.

Embargo of 1808-1809

The embargo of 1808-1809 prohibited trade with both Britain and France. The goal of this embargo was to avoid impact of the war between these two countries, and specifically to stop them raiding US-flagged vessels. The pressure of this embargo further accelerated the movement towards domestic production and manufacturing

War of 1812

During the war of 1812, the British navy blockaded the entire country, cutting off the US from trade with Europe. This was yet another factor pushing the inevitable movement towards domestic self-sufficiency in finished goods.

Monticello

Its Image as an Embodiment of Sovereign Independence and Domestic Production

In his own life, and in his centerpiece of Monticello in particular, Jefferson is well known to have practiced what he preached, determined to set a successful example of agrarian simplicity and self-sufficiency. For example, In response to the report that the ladies of Williamsburg did not fully support the 1808-9 embargo, Jefferson criticized their lack of patriotism in a letter to granddaughter Ellen Wayles Randolph, including his hope that, "*Principle and prudence will induce us all to return to the good old plan of manufacturing within our families most of the articles we need. I can assure you from experience that we never lived so comfortably as while we were reduced to this system formerly.*"⁶ Another granddaughter, Ann Cary Randolph wrote to Jefferson that, "*The embargo has set everyone to making homespun. Mama has made 157 yards since October, you will see all the children clothed in it.*"⁷

The Reality of Monticello: Necessity of Self-sufficiency & Refinement of Volume Fabric Production

The embargo of 1808-9 presented a huge challenge for Jefferson to achieve the goal of real self-sufficiency going forward at Monticello. The first challenge was the sheer volume of production, a problem he solved by using the automated machinery that was just beginning to revolutionize textile production in Europe. It took only a few years to move from hand-made to machine-made production. By June 1812 Jefferson wrote in a letter to Thaddeus Kosciuszko, "*My household manufacturers are just getting into operation.*" He then included an extensive list of machines he had bought and their costs. He added, "*I need 2000 yards of linen, cotton, and woolen yearly, to clothe my family, which this machinery, costing 150 dollars only, and worked by two women and two girls, will more than furnish.*" And finally he claimed that, "*Our manufacturers are very nearly on a footing with those of England.*

⁶ Thomas Jefferson and Edwin Morris Betts, "Spinning, Weaving, Cloth," in *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book: With Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings* ([Charlottesville]: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 466.

⁷ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America : The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, 102.

*She has not a single improvement, which we do not possess...*⁸ By 1812, Jefferson at least publicly believed that self-sufficiency was completely realized at Monticello. A model in full commercial independence - at least for basic quality textiles - only 30 years after the War of Independence.

Hypothesis of Blue Coat Provenance & Probability for Plantation-produced Fabric

As outlined above, Jefferson emphasized the real and political importance of using homespun textiles whenever possible. He was proud of Monticello's ability to produce coarse and mid-grade fabrics. To create higher-grade fabrics for finer clothes, he also sent out raw wool from Monticello to the mill at Staunton where it was carded, spun, woven, fulled, dyed and dressed as higher-grade cloth. For example, there is a written record of Jefferson sending wool there in July 1814 for the creation of navy blue broad cloth. (But the poor quality of the dye job in that instance meant that it was re-dyed black even before it was returned to Jefferson).⁹

It is also documented that Jefferson created wool/cotton blends at Monticello for the reasons discussed by Baumgarten earlier. "P.S. I think that this, or one year, more will have raised our stock of sheep to one for every person in the state, which we deem sufficient for our clothing with the aid of our cotton. This spun so much more cheaply than hemp and flax that it will be substituted entirely for the coarse shirting..."¹⁰

So is this coat made of homespun or outsourced material? We believe that it is likely homespun for several reasons. First the coarseness of the fabric; it is not particularly densely woven and with its simple weave structure is of a type that would have been routine for the manufacturing technology Jefferson had successfully installed at Monticello. In addition he had all the needed carding and spinning machinery to process the raw materials of his farm. Simply stated, with his proud emphasis on Monticello's homespun capabilities, there would have been no compelling reason to outsource this grade of cloth for a functional coat for private use. Of course, this conclusion does not actually *prove* the coat is homespun.

Tailoring clues: Initial Construction & Professional Execution

While we believe the relatively coarse cloth indicates plantation-based production at Monticello, the professional quality of the tailoring is another matter, particularly in contrast with the quality of the subsequent repairs and alterations – see below. This is most definitely a well-constructed coat. And specific detailed earmarks of professional tailoring include the length of the stitches and the consistency of the stitches, which are all consistent with a well-trained hand. In addition, all the seams are either enclosed or finished in some way.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson and Edwin Morris Betts, "Spinning, Weaving, Cloth," in *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book: With Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings*, 477.

⁹ Thomas Jefferson and Edwin Morris Betts, "Spinning, Weaving, Cloth," in *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book: With Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings*, 486.

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson and Edwin Morris Betts, "Spinning, Weaving, Cloth," in *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book: With Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings*, 481.

The argument for outsourced tailoring is further supported by the relative crudeness of the subsequent repairs alterations. If Monticello possessed tailoring skills capable of producing this original quality of coat, surely they would have been used to repair a dress coat worn by the plantation owner himself, even if only for private wear.

Subsequent Alterations: Crude Method and Execution

The only noticeable repairs to this coat are the patched elbows – work that is rather crudely executed in comparison the original tailoring. The main alteration appears to be removal of the original pockets from the pleats in the rear of the coat and replacement with new pockets in the front. Interestingly, the same rust-imbued (linen?) thread appears to have been used in both the repair and alterations, suggesting that perhaps these were performed around the same time.

Given the condition of the elbows and the wear visible around the original (pleat) pocket locations, we believe the pockets were likely altered because of normal failure of the pocket bags after years of use. Moving them to the front of the coat was likely a question of improved practicality rather than any effort to “update” the style of this coat, given the haphazard combination of style features it already contained. (This was clearly a practical coat, and rear pleat pockets are not particularly practical!)

Although these front pockets are clearly an alteration to the original from of the coat, the material used to create the new pocket flaps appears to be identical in type, color and condition to that used in the main body and sleeves of the coat, making the repairs relatively inconspicuous to the casual viewer. How is this possible? We believe that sufficient material would have been salvageable from the original pocket bags and that these are the source of the new pocket flap material. In contrast, the new pocket bags are made of natural linen with no attempt to match the color of the coat for these normally concealed details.

The patches that constitute the elbow repairs appear to be some type of blue twill. While the color may have been a good match when the coat was repaired this twill fabric has aged differently making these patches clearly visible. Why use this twill? We will never know the answer to this question. Perhaps there was not sufficient material that could be salvaged from the original pocket flaps to make the new flaps and these repairs. It was not unusual for even people of significant means and social standing to wear patched clothing in the time of Jefferson, certainly in private, so it is possible the decision was made to use the “matched” material for the radical changes – the new flaps to enable movement of the pockets – to minimize the appearance of a “salvaged” garment.

Ongoing Work: Scientific confirmation of Fiber ID & Textile Composition

The next phase of investigation of this coat will involve removing a few sample fibers from an inconspicuous part of the coat – e.g., from a concealed seam – and sending these out of Monticello for formal laboratory analysis. At this time, we are still determining the minimum sample size that will yield definitive analysis. A decision will then be made by the curator and collections manager at Monticello to remove said fibers.

Fiber analysis will involve high-resolution optical microscopy and if necessary electron microscopy.

Independent Laboratory Analysis of Dye Characterization

The fibers will then be subjected to dye extraction using appropriate solvent methods and the dye will be analyzed by UV-Vis Spectrometry, and possibly X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF.) The latter is a method used to identify the metal content that is usually responsible for vivid colored dyes before the invention of aniline dyes.

Summary

This blue frock coat is a well-preserved garment that gives insights into tailoring practices of the early 19th century. But because of its provenance from the wardrobe of Thomas Jefferson it is much more than just this. Jefferson was a man who understood style and image. From contemporary accounts and from portraiture we know that he understood how to project an image congruent with an agrarian, self-sufficient America. This author believes that this coat is an excellent reflection of this. It is simple, practical, unadorned, and importantly it may well be self-made, using textile grown and possibly woven at Monticello. As such it can be considered a microcosm of the man himself and the country he did so much to create.

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