

## Shirts for the Big Man

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Many a six-footer has graced the pages of the history of the American War for Independence. Sadly, few of their clothes survived to be used as the models for today's reproduction clothing. Consequently it has been an ongoing problem to size-up these patterns.

The following collection of notes, from personal experience, will endeavor to specifically assist the shirtmaker for the big and tall man. Included among them are tips for shirts of every size.

**Collar** Do not base your shirt size on the wearer's favorite modern day dress shirt. Today's stiff collars allow for men to get away with a more comfortable size. This is flawed thinking with 18th Century shirts.

If the collar is too loose, it will poke out of the top of the stock like a rosette or may slide out from underneath. Considering that a man's shirt, waistcoat, cloak, frock or smock all have the same basic neck line, this is the last place you want extra fabric.

To assure a proper fit, simply take a snug measurement around the base of the neck. To this you need to add two inches. This covers seams and the button overlap.

The width of the collar panel, the standard eight inches, works for most people. It results in a finished 3 1/2 inch collar. However, as we all know, big guys have no necks, so you might want to skinny it down a bit.

Once assembled, the collar needs to be top stitched. In this case, the top stitch is a single line from end to end, about 3/8 of an inch up from the base of the finished collar. This stitch may be done on a sewing machine for speed, or with a hand back-stitch for accuracy. This stitch line helps secure the collar and keeps it from stretching or pulling out of shape.

**Shoulder Gusset** Be sure to be generous cutting your shoulder gussets. They must not be less than 3 1/2 inches square, folded into a perfect triangle. The tendency is to cut them

smaller or fold them irregularly. For necks greater than size 18, a four inch gusset would be in order. However, you should extend the slit for the neck opening a half inch on either end to allow for the larger gusset.

**Neck Opening** Shirts designed symmetrically for a more slender man, will not fit as well in the critical collar area on a bigger man. These men tend to have thick backs and broad shoulders. The maker should therefore consider this when working on the collar.

The larger shoulder gussets being employed require the maker to only cut a 15 inch slit for the neck opening, rather than the usual 16 inches. This reduces the amount of gathering and give the wearer some more shoulder room.

By gathering up to about six inches in the back of the shirt, the gussets will be drawn closer to the crest of the shoulder. The rest of the gathers are taken in the front of the shirt.

There are no hard and fast rules here, but what results is a shirt collar worn higher on the back with a relaxed fit dropping down to the front of the neck. The look is really not that much different than any other reproduction shirt, but it fits a whole lot better.

**Shoulder Reinforce** The wide panel stitched to the inside of the shoulder serves a dual purpose. It not only strengthens the shoulder, but also finishes off the sleeve seam. Only attach the sleeve to the shirt body. Once you are satisfied with the positioning and symmetry of the gathers, turn under the seamage on the "reinforcing" panel, and hand stitch it to the sleeve seam line.

Many people have found the reinforcing strip sewn to the outside of the shirt, from collar to shoulder, to be wonderfully appealing. Unfortunately, this appears to be a later period affectation and should be avoided at all cost.

**Sleeves** Wider sleeves are a must for a big man. Eighteen inches (less seamage) is too small a

circumference. Twenty is far more practical, and still does not add a lot of excess fabric that will be jammed into a coat sleeve.

**Underarm Gusset** Certainly if the sleeve is widened you should make a larger underarm gusset. This increase should be subtle and not exceed one additional inch each way.

Since these gussets are to be double thick squares, try cutting them as single thick rectangles and folding them. You will have one less raw edge to deal with.

**Sleeve Cuff** The finished cuff should not be any wider than an inch (except maybe on an outer shirt where it could be a bit wider). Remember, two inch cuffs are dated as being from the early 19th Century. Both of the finished cuffs are top stitched similar to the collar, but in smaller proportions.

**Tail Gusset** This optional item is essentially useless. A few good stitches will prevent the side seam from tearing.

**Shirt Length** Most shirts are made too short for an average sized man, let alone a big one. Be sure to allow sufficient length for the wearer to raise his arms and blouse the shirt out of the waistband of the breeches and not pull out. This usually means the shirt must reach the top of the knee when hung from the shoulders.

**Seams** Linen can unravel until there is nothing left of the fabric. Be sure to narrowly flat fell and/or finish all of your seams. It is drudgery, but be reminded that shirt making is an exercise

in stitching, not tailoring - a perfect task for a young apprentice!

**Shirts for Soldiers** You can never have too many shirts, especially big guys who sweat a lot. A good rule of thumb is one for each day of a weekend and one to change in to for the evening activities. In colder weather or if you can wash them, you can get away with two. In high humidity you may want four.

Do not dismiss this opinion out of hand. There is historical precedent for it. It is common knowledge that the British Army called for three shirts per man,<sup>1</sup> and there is also a reference for the opposition. A recently discovered company account book listed the effects of a soldier who died on the Canadian campaign. Though he only possessed one pair of breeches, he had two white shirts and one checked shirt.<sup>2</sup>

[*The Brigade of the American Revolution presented Phil Weaver with the award of Master Shirtmaker on April 25, 1987.*]

### Notes

1. Smith, George. An Universal Military Dictionary. London: J. Millan, 1779; reprinted by Museum Restoration Service, Ottawa, Canada, 1969, p. 193.

2. Livingston, Henry Beekman. Ledger of Accounts, 4th New York Regiment, July 1775 - February 1777. Preliminary Inventory of the War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records, Record Group 93, National Archives Record Service, Washington, DC, 1970, p. 22, item 40. Compiled by Mabel E. Deutch.

### **Pieces to make a knee-length plain shirt (18/36 - tall)** (dimensions in inches)

	<u>Cut One:</u>		<u>Cut Two</u>
body	(33 x 82)	sleeves	(20 x 25)
collar	(20 x 8)	neck gussets	(3.5 x 3.5)
slit facing	(2.5 x 11.5)	arm gussets	(12.5 x 6.25)
		shoulder reinforce	(9.5 x 23)
		cuffs	(10 x 3)

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