

**Some Thoughts on  
Belts, Sashes & Suspenders  
1800-1840  
Gene Hickman**

**Belts**

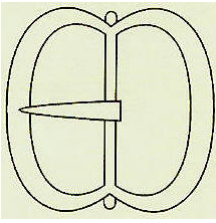
Leather belts are common and are seen in most paintings and sketches. Belts were worn to close coats or capotes and most commonly to hold the knife sheath. Belt loops are not yet placed on pants so belts really are not worn to hold up pants through the use of "loops." If you need to hold up your trousers or pants you would wear suspenders or braces. These are "utility" belts for holding and carrying "stuff." We have also found no documentation, sketches or paintings of trappers with "tomahawks" thrust into their belts, like many of us do today. I'm sure it may have been done as an expedient when working to free the hands, but it doesn't seem to be the method of carry.

Miller shows few belts without knife sheaths attached, and in fact some invoices or accounts show belts being sold with knives and sheaths.

Louis Labue...1 Belt Scabbard & Knife \$0.87  
Joseph Hardin...1 Belt & Scabbard .37 1/2  
Joseph Hardin...1 knife 50c Belt & Scabbard 1\$ 1.50  
Henry Green...1 Belt & Scabbard .37 1/2  
Bought of Thornton Grimsley... 1/2 Doz Red painted Belts 6\$ 3.00  
Bought of Thornton Grimsley... 5 Belts & Scabbards .37 1/2 1.87 1/2  
Amt brought forward... 1 belt & scabbard 1.50  
(1832, Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade, Part 3: Robert Campbell Family Collection).

The American Fur Company records show that between 1829-1834 they purchased ...*leather belts*... from Grimsley's saddle shop which also furnished saddles, halters, bridles, hobbles, saddle bags, stirrup leathers and pack saddles (American Fur Company Fur Trade Ledgers, 1802-1871, AMFC Retail Store Cash Book, Vol. R, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO.).

Most belts seen in period sketches and paintings are plain leather about 2" or less in width. This is contrary to the many large 3" wide or wider belts commonly seen on today's buckskinner. All the belts shown are plain leather without beads, brass tacks, conchos, silver coins or other ornamentation. Belts are just plain leather. The overly "tacked" belts and concho belts, becoming more common at today's rendezvous are from a much later period and seem to have a southwestern origin. These types of tacked or conchos belts are seen in late 1800s photos of Indians and Mexicans.



Buckles are most commonly brass, but iron and steel buckles are worn too. Brass at the time is actually cheaper than steel or iron and certainly is more “flashy.” Consequently most buckles seem to be brass. Brass also does not oxidize or rust and is more durable out in the elements than a steel buckle. Buckles commonly seen are square, rectangular, oval or double “D”.

Here’s a quote from Charles Larpentuer’s *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, referencing brass on a belt: *...On the 19th of July we left Union. On reaching the landing at Buford we learned that the Sioux had fired on the traders whom Mr. Gaben had sent from Union to them, after obtaining permission of the Peace Commissioners to do so. One was shot in the back with an arrow; and at least one ball glanced off the other, having struck the brass mounting of his belt.*

What we do not find are the large forged buckles or not even the very large brass buckles becoming more popular with today’s buckskinner. Most buckles are simple square or rectangular, although the “double D” buckle from the military is evident too. Roller buckles, more common on harness and straps, are also available and actually date to medieval times.

1 gro 2" Roller Buckles 2.5 2.5

½ gro Roller Buckles for Harness \$1.25 \$0.105

(Invoice of Sundry Merchandise furnished Rocky Mountain Outfit 1837 under charge of Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Co.).

An interesting point in Miller’s sketches, are that buckles are not worn centered in the front but are worn off-center to the side.

There are not a lot of belts & buckles in the fur trade records, but this may be due to several factors:

- Belts last quite a bit longer than other clothing items.
- Buckles would survive when the rest of the belt has worn out.
- Belts are easily manufactured by trappers themselves either with old buckles, buckles taken from horse accoutrements, or with new buckles.

## **Sashes**

In an article in the *Northwest Journal* ([Http://www.northwestjournal.ca](http://www.northwestjournal.ca)), Ross Cox noted that “*They [voyageurs] all wear belts of variegated worsted, from which their knives, smoking-bags, &c., are suspended*” (R. Cox, 1957. *The Columbia River*. E.I. and J.R. Stewart, editors. University of Oklahoma Press : Norman, OK). Sashes are found on inventory lists and in paintings of voyageurs, where they are usually being used to belt an outer garment such as a capote closed. Sashes are

shown over and over again in the Canadian paintings of the French and Indians by Rindisbacher and Krieghoff. These sashes seem to function the same as belts to close garments and to hold knives, tobacco pouches, etc. Some sashes were woven in a variety of patterns, ranging from a simple chevron to more elaborate 'arrow' and 'flame' motifs, and were sometimes embellished with small white beads (Gottfred, 2002. *What Voyageurs Wore: Voyageur Clothing from Head to Toe, 1774-1821*. Northwest Journal. ISSN 1206-4203). For more information on voyageur sashes, and instructions on how to weave one, see Ceinture Fléchée: *Making a Voyageur Sash*, in Northwest Journal Vol. VI, pp. 1-5 (Northwest Journal ISSN 1206-4203). The elaborate multi-colored sashes or Assomption sashes were not common with the "working man." The multi-colored or fancy sashes were generally kept for special occasions, being made by mothers, sisters or wives to be worn by the men at their wedding or other special occasions. Higher ranking officials in HBC or wealthier patrons also wore these fancier multicolor sashes, but as a badge of distinction or even wealth. Here is an example of a "fancy" sash listed in an inventory of the goods of a deceased Fulgencio Roles in Monterey, CA May 9 of 1842: *1 sash which cost him a horse and a mare* (Rickman's *Costume Manual*).



From Hudson Bay Company Museum HBC 73-315 : Assomption sashes originally manufactured in Assomption, Quebec. Their British machine woven copies (Manchester sashes) were very popular trade items in later years.

The common working Frenchmen, who normally wear sashes, wore plain sashes. These sashes were often of a single color but may have no more than 3 colors. Sashes are usually shown in paintings as being of one color with red being the most common. The French, Spanish, Indians, and Metis seem to be the ones that predominantly prefer to wear sashes. Sashes are uncommon for other Euro-Americans in the fur trade, although at one time (1700s) they were more common with Euro-Americans on the frontier, but seem to have lost favor with Euro-Americans by the 1800s. It would seem that the continued wear of sashes is more an ethnic preference in the 1800s. Of course there are exceptions as will be related below. As another note we could not find Miller showing any sashes in his sketches and paintings.

*As suspenders do not form a component part of a regular Mexican costume, the nether garment is supported by a rich sash which is drawn very tightly around the body, and contributes materially to render the whole appearance of the caballero extremely picturesque...*, from Josiah Gregg's 1844 *Commerce of the Prairies* describing the styles of dress in New Mexico.

Sashes were woven of wool and/or linen and were a cottage industry in 1700s frontier America. Sashes were often worn tied in the back on the American frontier and not on the side as seen in military sashes. Woven leg-ties were also more popular with Euro-Americans during this time period too. However, the colored woven leg ties seem to only persist with some Indians, Metis and certain ethnic groups in the 1800s. In Karl Koster's research of 27 individuals in the artwork of 1750-1860 period, it shows Voyageurs wearing sashes tied equally in back, on the right side, and on the left side (K. Koster, 2002. Personal Communications. Grand Portage National Monument/NPS Grand Marais, Minnesota, 55604). For a good look at some sashes and wear of sashes American Frontier style, see The Wilde Weavery (<http://wildeweavery.com/>) or Trailhead Trade Co. (<http://www.trailhd.com/>).

Willam Drummond Stewart's account references him as wearing both a sash and a leather belt. Chronister believes that he may wear one to hold up his leggings and the other for his knife (The Book of Buckskinning VII, Clothing of the rocky Mountain Trapper, 1820-1840. 1995. Scurlock Publ. Texarkana, TX).

Fur trade records show trappers trading for sashes. Chronister (1995) in the Book of Buckskinning VII, says that,

...On January 14, 1835, Lewis Boseley was given \$10.00 credit by the company for "1 sash pd in exchange for Horse (while trapping)" (Columbia Ledger 2:64). With sashes selling for \$4.00 to \$6.00, Boseley's sash must have been somewhat special to command a \$10.00 price. A list of general expenses for April of the same year includes "3 Red Sashes" and Nathaniel Wyeth is charged \$2.00 (wholesale price) for "1 crimson sash given to Ant. Godar" in a February 1836 entry (Columbia Ledger 2:2, Ledger 1:33). Red or crimson must have been the sash color of choice, because another crimson sash was bought by Thomas McKay for \$6.00 on the same date as Wyeth's purchase. A ledger entry for "1 broad scarlet belt" in 1837 could be describing a different style of sash or merely referring to a red leather belt (Columbia Leger 1:114)...Like many other articles used by the rocky Mountain trapper, sashes were also an Indian trade item. While our documentation proves that trappers purchased dual culture trade items...it does not conclusively prove that the trappers used these items. (Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company. Fort Hall Accounts. 1834-1837. 3 vols. Microfilm ed. Portland, Or: Oregon Historical Society).

A List of the various articles...taken from the invoices furnished by the Traders at the Superintendency St. Louis...1831 shows 6 doz. *Indian sashes* which were probably destined for the Indian trade, but it is unclear as to how they may have differed from other sashes (Messages from the President on the State of the Fur

trade 1824-1832, Ye Galleon Press, 1985, Fairfield, WA).

If you are so inclined, sashes can be woven fairly easily by several methods, i.e. finger weaving, card weaving or on an inkle loom (which you can also make). The same techniques can also be used to weave straps for tumplines, powder horns, shooting bags, gun slings, etc. Be sure to use pure wool and or linen in your weaving. However, these woven "straps" seem to be more common in early frontier America, and with Canadians, eastern Indians and mixed-bloods, than they do in the Rocky Mountain west, especially with Euro-Americans. If this still fits your persona, try weaving some sashes, you'll find once you get into it, that it's not that hard.

### **Braces, Gallowses or Suspenders**

Suspenders were very popular in the 1800s and were the most common way of holding up your trousers. Remember pants did not have loops and belts were to carry your knife and hold your shirt or capote shut.

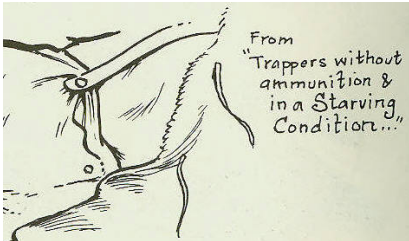
Braces, Gallowses or Suspenders probably go back to at least the 1600s. The French probably invented braces fixed into buttonholes called "bretelles." In Great Britain suspenders are what we would think of as garters. Benjamin Franklin, publisher, diplomat, framer of the Declaration of Independence and the U. S. Constitution, inventor of the lightning rod, the Franklin stove, and bi-focal glasses also adapted and made popular "gallowses" or suspenders around 1736. The inspiration for gallowses probably came from gallows, which is also a method of hanging things.

The first suspenders had an H-back, and then in the 18<sup>th</sup> century they crossed over in an X-back, and finally around 1850 arrived at the forked Y-back still in style today. We know that the military issued suspenders, up through the Civil War, were held up with only 4 suspender buttons indicating an "X" back and no split ends on the front. However, we have not been able to confirm these as the only style for civilian use during our time period, nor do we know when the split double button on each front strap started.

The first patent ever issued for modern suspenders (the kind with the familiar metal clasp) was issued to an inventor called Roth (US patent # 527887 issued in October, 1894.) On December 19, 1891, Mark Twain received the first of three patents for gallowses. One of these patents was for elastic gallowses [suspenders]. So we know the metal clasps and elastic in suspenders are not correct until the 1890s.

Most suspenders were simply two straps of leather, cloth, or knitted material with buttonholes at one end, and with either buttonholes, or straps and buckles

for adjustment. They were probably in the "X" configuration and used only 4 buttons. We do know that civilian suspenders were made of leather, canvas, drill, woven (cotton, hemp or linen), or ticking, some were advertised as worsted, web and cotton, and many were quite elaborate made from tapestry, or with embroidery, or crochet work.



Here's a copy from an A.J. Miller, 1837 as found in R.A. Norman's *The 1837 Sketchbook of the Western Fur Trade*. Of course suspenders could be easily manufactured by a man in the field.

Some suspenders were known as "poor boys," being made from all cloth or leather without buckles or "sliders." There are not very many references to suspenders in the fur trade records we looked at. This may be due to the fact that they could be so easily manufactured by the trappers themselves.

Suspenders were not exceptionally wide, about 1 ½" being the widest. The leather ends of the non-adjustable poor boy suspenders often had two holes above each other, so that the suspender could be lengthened or shortened by buttoning a different hole. Other suspenders were adjustable with tin, brass, or japanned steel buckles. We have not been able to determine when the adjustable "sliding-clip-over" lock type mechanism was first used on suspenders.

Angela Gotfred in her research says that *...towards 1821, there are some indications that suspenders were sometimes worn by voyageurs.* (What Voyageurs Wore : Voyageur Clothing from Head to Toe, 1774-1821, Northwest Journal, <http://www.northwestjournal.ca/XVIII1.htm>).

In 1834 the records at Fort Union indicate that they had 2 dozen pairs of suspenders in their stores. In 1831 the AFC records show that Kenneth McKenzie bought a pair of knitted suspenders (American fur company. Fur Trade ledgers. 1802-1871, 74 vols. Missouri Historical society). In 1837 at fort hall the Kanaka trapper Pig and a man named Rice were each charged \$1.00 for cotton braces (Columbia river Fishing and Trading Company. Fort Hall Accounts. 1834-1837. 3 Vols. Oregon Historical Society).

60 Pair Suspenders \$.75 ...\$45... Invoice of Sundry Merchandise sold and delivered to the Missouri Company by Fr<sup>s</sup> Regnier at St. Louis the 3<sup>d</sup> May, 1809

1 pr Suspenders (to Henry)...1.00...Robert Campbell's accounts from 1832, *Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade, Part 3*: Robert Campbell Family Collection, St. Louis Mercantile Library Association