

Some Thoughts on Buckles

By Gene Hickman

Buckles are most commonly brass, but iron and steel buckles are worn too. Brass also does not oxidize or rust like steel or iron and is consequently more durable than a steel/iron buckle. Brass, during the early fur trade period, is cheaper than iron in most areas, and certainly are more “flashy.” Most all military buckles are brass and many of these find their way into civilian use. Consequently most early fur trade buckles are probably brass, although most have iron tongues.

We have few references to buckles in the fur trade inventories or documents, but we do have belts, bridles, halters, pack straps, surcingles, and other gear that would have had buckles. Here is one of the “maddening” generic type buckle references occasionally found in the inventories:

Memorandum of Goods left at Fort Hall 1834:

- 2 dz large sized buckles
- 5 1/2 dz small buckles
- 21 large buckles

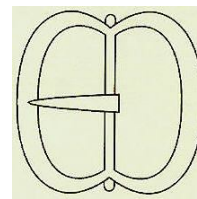
Many buckles were probably removed from horse harness for making belts, and harness buckles were brass or iron. Additionally, many belts and buckles, often with attached sheaths, were purchased for the fur brigades from saddle makers who are the same folks who were supplying the horse tack.

The big round blacksmith made forged buckles, that have become so common among modern buckskinners, are difficult to document. They do not show up in inventories, invoices, journals, paintings or sketches from the fur trade era. Most of these seem to have proliferated during modern buckskinner days. Doesn't mean they weren't there, just can't find them. Since most documented belts are 2" or smaller, the buckles are also smaller, again contrary to what are commonly seen on many of today's buckskinners.

Roller buckles are a type of common buckle dating back to medieval times. However, roller buckles are more often seen on horse tack and equipment straps than on waist belts.

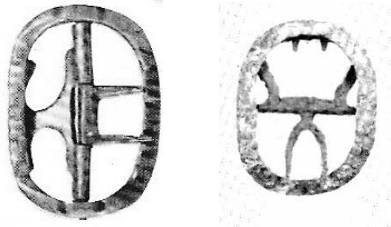
In the Invoice of Sundry Merchandise furnished Rocky Mountain Outfit 1837 under charge of Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Co. we find an entries for

- 1/2 Gro Roller Buckles for Harness \$1.25
- 1 Gro 2" Roller Buckles \$2.50

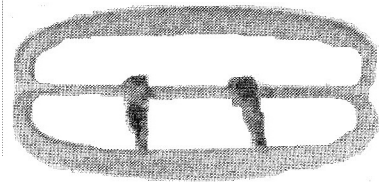


Double “D” buckle.

Double “D” buckles were common on straps for military gear, such as gun slings, cartouche boxes, shooting bags, sword and bayonet shoulder carriages, knapsacks, etc. Consequently this style buckle was plentiful and was popular for civilian use too.



Many early buckles also had forked tongues, such as seen on shoe buckles, or buckles with two or three tongues. Many of these were special buckles for specific tasks.



This double tongue and even triple tongue buckles were commonly used on belts or large straps.

All the buckles we've been able to document are square, rectangular, oval or double "D". The double "D" buckle was popular with the military in the 1700s thru the 1800s. Both the double "D" buckles with the tongue for belts and without the tongue as a "slider" are common.