

APPEARANCE AND EQUIPMENT OF CATAWBA WARRIORS, 1750-1785

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At the time of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, the Eastern Woodland Indians, including the Catawbans, Cherokees, Shawnees and others, were no longer using bows and arrows as their primary weapons. Rather, they had been using flintlock rifles and “trade guns” provided by the colonial powers for many years. A typical Catawba warrior during this time period would be equipped with a powder horn, shot bag, and a “medicine bag” in which he could keep herbs, roots, dried meat, totems and sacred objects, and other small items that were important to him. While on campaign with the South Carolina troops or other provincial soldiers, the warriors would be fed along with the soldiers. The SC government also paid them for military service, just like they paid the state troops and militia.

The Catawba Cultural Preservation Project in Rock Hill, SC, has in its collection a silver gorget that belonged to Piney George (misspelled “Finey George” on the gorget), who served with the Catawba company during the Revolution. It looks very much like the gorgets worn by American and British officers during the war; it was a gift from the SC government after the war in recognition of his service. It is likely that all the surviving Catawba warriors were given such gorgets after the war by the SC government, as the eastern Indians had a tradition of wearing gorgets that went far back into prehistory. Early gorgets were made of stone and were finely worked, so warriors in the Rev War period might have also worn their own homemade gorgets, since they seem to have fancied them a great deal, or they might have taken them from dead British and Loyalist officers or received them as gifts from Continental officers. In addition to carrying a flintlock (either rifle or trade gun) and a tomahawk, a warrior would almost certainly have also carried a steel knife. Most of the militiamen had them as well, primarily for dressing meat, cutting tree branches, etc., but also for hand-to-hand combat if needed.

The most important reference for the Catawbans’ appearance during this period is found in James Merrell’s book *The Indians’ New World*, page 125-126. This description refers to the French and Indian War period of the 1750s-1760s. “Men might put on an old coat or a shirt underneath a blanket wrap, but they shunned hats altogether and wore leggings, flaps, and moccasins instead of pants and shoes” (p. 125). On page 126, he refers to “the tattoos, the silver ornaments dangling from ears or nose, and the hair cut into various shapes...A visitor to Fort Christiana [Virginia] forgot all about the school, the blankets, and the other European trappings when fifty young men showed up dressed for war. Feathers stuck through their ears, heads shaved so that the hair on top stood up ‘like a cock’s comb,’ faces painted blue and red---the warriors’ appearance was ‘really...very terrible...like so many furies.’” (Merrell’s sources are listed in his notes.) Merrell also mentions in that same section that some of the headmen liked to wear European dress—coats, shirts, and hats—on formal occasions, but not for everyday use.

Some of the warriors might have been wearing leather hunting shirts like the colonial militiamen, but it is more likely that they would have considered that type of clothing to be too hot during the summer months, at least during the day. The drawing of Captain Redhead in the South Caroliniana Library, dated circa 1771, is an important source for the appearance of a Catawba warrior who served in Sumter's Brigade. The date for this drawing is right on the eve of the Revolution, and the drawing is very indicative of the appearance of the Catawba warriors in the 1770s, especially the facial tattoos, earrings, and scalp locks.



Captain Redhead, c. 1771. South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, SC.

We would expect that the nose rings, ear rings, and facial tattoos would be very much in style during the Revolution (as shown in the drawing of Redhead), as would the war paint, feathers, and unique hair styles with scalp locks. Boyd Saunders undoubtedly used these descriptions in his painting of the Catawba warriors at the Battle of Hanging Rock, which Walter Edgar used for the cover illustration of his book *Partisans and Redcoats*.



Boyd Saunders' painting of the Battle of Hanging Rock (August 1780)

On page 193 of *The Indians' New World*, Merrell refers to Catawba warriors returning from the French and Indian War in 1759 carrying "shirts, moccasins, and leggings handed out by the British officers." It is possible that the South Carolina government, which had been counting on the Catawbas' help since 1775, may have given them similar goods. On page 219, Merrell describes a "Catawba colonel" donning "an old Greencloth Coat, with gold binding, which buttoned very imperfectly over his naked body" during a tribal visit in 1798. Merrell does not say who the Catawba colonel was, but if the uniform was an SC Revolutionary uniform then it probably dates to the last couple of years of the war, 1781-1783, when there were a number of regiments of SC state troops wearing that type of uniform. However, it might just as well have been a captured British uniform. "Gold binding" (thread) sounds like an officer's or dragoon's uniform.

Finally, on page 229, referring to the immediate postwar period, Merrell describes the Catawbas as still looking very much like Indians: "...many still went around 'half nakid,' exposing their 'fine clear dark olive' skin to public view." Men might wear "a fancy cotton suit accented by a silver breastplate [gorget]. And everyone, man or woman, young or old, wore a silver nose ring, often with a tiny silver heart dangling from it. Even after scalp locks and facial tattoos went out of style, no one was likely to mistake a Catawba for a planter or slave."