

Introduction to Weapons of the American Revolution

Musket

The main weapon on any Revolutionary War battlefield was the smoothbore flintlock musket. Muskets in the Revolutionary War used a flintlock system— when the trigger was pulled, a piece of rock (flint) would strike a piece of steel creating a spark that would ignite black powder to discharge the piece. Muskets weighed approximately ten pounds each and measured between 50 and 60 inches long.

The primary British musket was the second model short land Brown Bess musket, and the primary French musket was the Charleville musket. American soldiers often possessed a Brown Besses or Charlevilles. Many of the militias had Brown Besses from when they were part of the [British Empire](#), and [Congress](#) imported numerous French muskets during the war. Smoothbore muskets fired quickly and repeatedly— a well-trained soldier could fire three shots in a minute, or every 15 or 20 seconds. The soldiers would take a cartridge, tear the paper with their teeth, and pour a pinch of powder in the pan of the musket on the lock. Then they would pour the remaining powder, ball, and paper down the muzzle and use a steel ramrod to drive the ball to the breech. After returning their ramrod, they would take aim at their target and fire the musket.

“Musket Made by Thomas Palmer”

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/musket-made-by-thomas-palmer-2>



“Musket Marked ‘NEW JERSEY’”

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/musket-marked-new-jersey>



“French Musket Marked ‘UNITED STATES’”

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/french-musket-marked-united-states>



“British Musket”

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/british-musket>



“Thomas Noyes’s Musket”

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/thomas-noyes-s-musket>



“Musket Made at Rappahannock Forge” (Detail of the trigger, hammer, and flint holder)

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/musket-made-at-rappahannock-forge>



Rifle

With the outbreak of the American Revolution, rifles found their way on to early battlefields in the hands of the [militia](#). The slower rate of fire, and lack of a bayonet, made the rifle ill-suited for traditional linear warfare. Where the rifle excelled, however, was in the skirmish line and in ambush tactics perfected by the Patriots. As the war evolved, American commanders began to identify the battlefield usefulness of the rifle, and battles such as [Saratoga](#) and [Cowpens](#) saw effective use of the technology.

Rifles had grooves carved inside the barrel that allowed the musket balls to spin when exiting the rifle— a deadly adaptation. However, the grooves slowed the ramming process. Contrarily, the Long Rifle traded accuracy for reloading speed and stretched its effective range to 200 yards. Many Long Rifles used smaller balls, ranging in size from about .30 to .50 calibers. With a smaller projectile, fitting tighter to the barrel, and a longer barrel to give the black powder time to expand, most Long Rifles had a much higher muzzle velocity than their smoothbore counterparts, resulting in a much higher lethality at longer range.

“Ferguson Rifle”

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/ferguson-rifle>



“Rifle Made by John Christian Oerter”

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/rifle-made-by-john-christian-oerter>



Bayonet

The first bayonets were knives affixed to gun barrels that allowed soldiers to fight in close quarters against cavalry, but they prevented the gun from being fired. Socket bayonets fit around the barrel and were commonplace by the time of the revolution. They also could attach a steel bayonet of about 16” in length to the end of the musket. The socket bayonet fixed to the end of the musket without blocking the hole, instead of the bayonet piece blocking the hole. These smoothbore muskets only maintained about an 80-yard accuracy range. To compensate for this complication, armies used linear tactics to consolidate their firepower. Battles often involved numerous volley firings that would inflict casualties and break up formations and then soldiers would rely on bayonet charges to drive the enemy from the field. Fighting with bayonets resulted in ghastly wounds from the 17-inch triangular blade.

“American ‘Brown Bess’ style bayonet”

Photo source: <https://emuseum.history.org/objects/69706/american--brown-bess-style-bayonet?ctx=21ade2a6d9aa11b9dcca044de8ce68edaeccdc95&idx=8>



“American fusil or fowler bayonet”

Photo source: <https://emuseum.history.org/objects/83744/american-fusil-or-fowler-bayonet?ctx=21ade2a6d9aa11b9dcca044de8ce68edaecdc95&idx=14>



“French M-1774 Infantry Musket Bayonet”

Photo source: <https://emuseum.history.org/objects/108531/french-m1774-infantry-musket-bayonet?ctx=21ade2a6d9aa11b9dcca044de8ce68edaecdc95&idx=23>



Cannons

Three types of cannons were utilized during the late 1700s period, depending on their projectile trajectory. The siege gun defended or destroyed fortifications, on buildings and infantry in a mostly flat trajectory known as direct fire. Field guns could fire two forms of ammunition. The light field gun wielded less power but was easily moveable for a traveling army. The third type was the heavy field piece, which was a combination of the siege gun and light field pieces. Furthermore, mortars and howitzers fired at a much higher angle. This meant that they usually had shorter range than a cannon but could shoot over the heads of friendly troops. Mortars resembled the oldest gunpowder artillery pieces, and typically fired a solid ball nearly one mile into the air. Once the ball reached its apex, gravity took hold and drew the shot down onto the target, devastating enemy fortifications. They also fired a shell that would explode on a timed fuse.

“Siege Cannon, 18-pounder”

Photo source: <https://www.nps.gov/york/learn/historyculture/revolutionary-war-artillery.htm>



“Field Gun”

Photo source: <https://www.nps.gov/york/learn/historyculture/revolutionary-war-artillery.htm>



“Siege Cannon, 24-pounder”

Photo source: <https://www.nps.gov/york/learn/historyculture/revolutionary-war-artillery.htm>



Pistols

In addition to muskets, officers on both sides carried pistols, swords, and polearms to lead and to use in close quarters combat. The officers' main duty was to keep the formations together in a battle and could use their swords and polearms to help do that but would use them for combat when the two armies locked in hand-to-hand combat. In addition to infantry soldiers carrying small arms, both sides employed cavalry in the war, and these mounted troops were often equipped with pistols and curved sabers used for slashing. The [cavalry](#) would often charge into enemy infantry formations to cut down enemy soldiers or engage other cavalry units in close.

“Peter Muhlenberg’s Pistols”

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/peter-muhlenberg-s-pistols>



Swords

A sword was often a fashion accessory and a marker of status and prestige. A sword was a vital component of a military commander’s uniform. Swords were also used for ceremonial purposes, like passing the British sword of surrender to [Benjamin Lincoln](#) at Yorktown. [George Washington’s](#) swords were particularly symbolic during the Revolutionary War. Washington never swung his Bailey sword at any opponent, but instead was used to direct troops during battle. During the Revolutionary War, Washington often carried a Cuttose, which characterized independent American commerce because it a wealthy American merchant gifted it to him. Moreover, Washington’s most significant sword was with him when he signed the [Treaty of Paris](#). This moment was significant because Washington did not indicate intent to literally or figurately wield his sword to militarily oppress his new constituents; for example, once the war was over, Washington ceremonially returned his sword to its scabbard and resigned his commission as commander-in-chief. At the end of his life, Washington left his swords to his nephews, and in the bequest, he said, “These swords are accompanied with an injunction not to unsheathe them for the purpose of shedding blood, except it be for self-defense, or in defense of their Country.”

“Benjamin Lincoln’s Sword”

Photo source: https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_438723



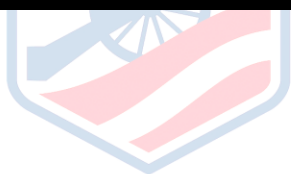
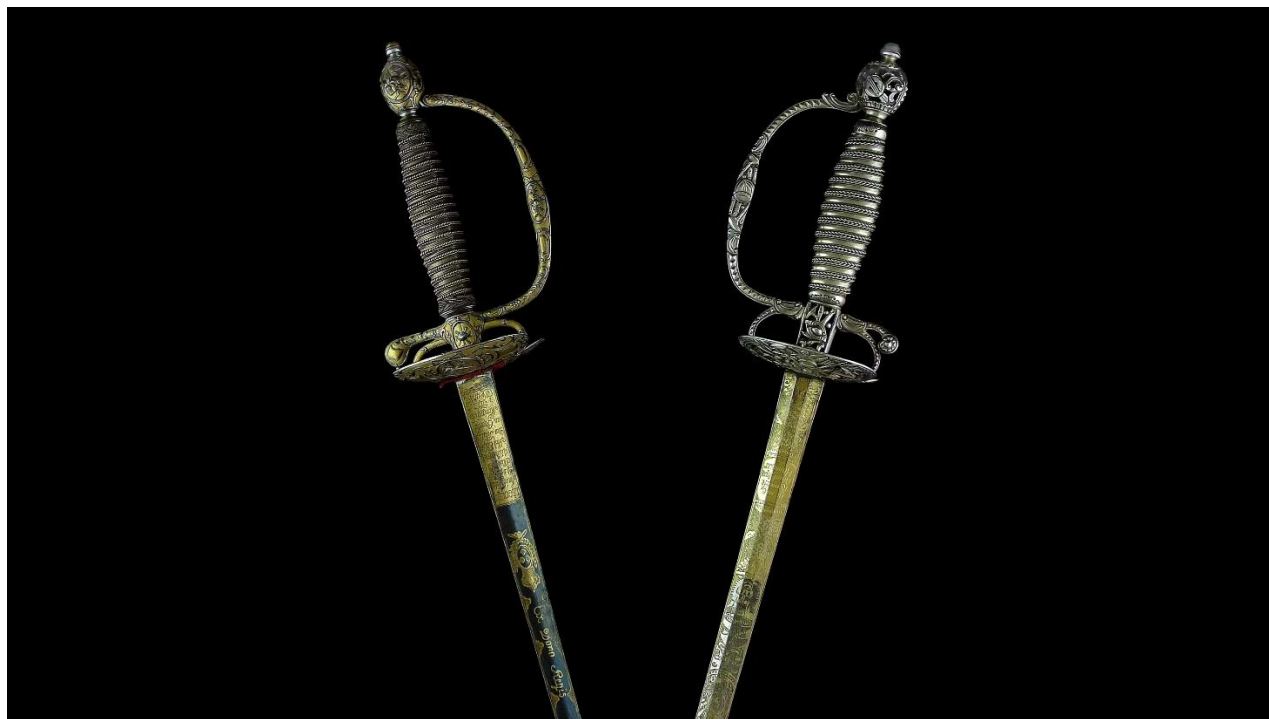
“The Silver Lion Headed Cuttoe”

Photo source: <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections-holdings/washingtons-swords/the-silver-lion-headed-cuttoe/>



“British and French Swords”

Photo source: <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/british-and-french-swords>



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