

On the Frontier

Newsletter of the Frontier Living History Group

Date – July 2009

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Important information

Victorian Police's –
Re-enactors Guide Booklet
http://www.police.vic.gov.au/retrievemedia.asp?media_id=36984&status=active

UP COMING EVENTS



In 2009

September

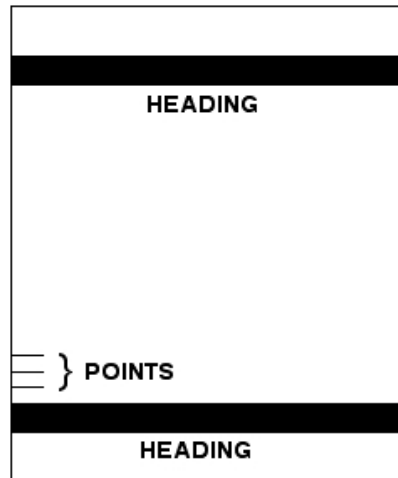
**Southern Cross Free Trappers
Camp at Beaver Creek**
19th/20th thru to 26th/27th Sept
Contact : John Fowler
Ph: 03 5753 4455
Email: chookster@vfowler.com



Point Blankets

What do the points mean ?

The points always indicated the size of the blanket, with less points used for smaller blankets and more for larger ones. In a sense they are a kind of code or a label indicating the blanket's size.



Do the points have anything to do with the blanket's value or price?

Naturally, larger blankets cost more to make and therefore sell for higher prices than smaller ones. The Hudson's Bay Company used a unit of currency called the "Made Beaver" that equaled the value of one fully dressed beaver pelt. Most of the Company's goods were valued in their equivalency to the Made Beaver. A fine Arctic Fox fur might be worth five Made Beaver, a gun thirty.

So too the blankets were valued in their equivalency to Made Beaver *as that value changed from time to time*. There have been times when a blanket commanded a price in beaver pelts closely equal to one pelt per point, but over the long period during which these blankets were traded this was rarely the case. The points originally indicated the blanket's size and *not its price in beaver pelts* and the points continue to indicate size today.

What is the origin of the point markings?

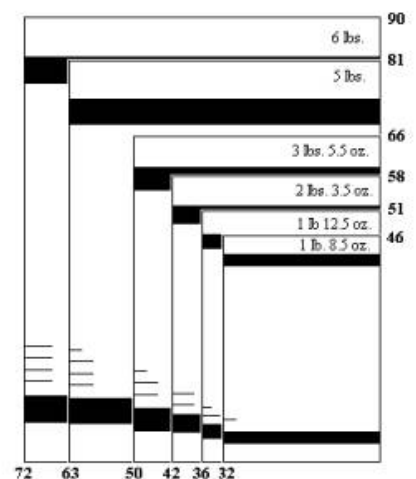
It is believed that the use of points started with French weavers perhaps as early as the 16th century. It has been suggested that the term derives from the French word *empointer*, meaning to make stitches in cloth.

By the 18th century, blankets and clothing made from blankets appearing in old illustrations and paintings show that the use of points on blankets had become quite common by that time.

How do the number of points indicate the size of the blanket they appear on?

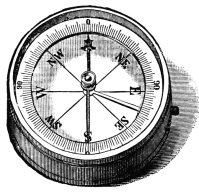
There appears to have never been an original standard to point markings. But during the 19th century Hudson's Bay Company did establish standard sizes that they would accept from their suppliers and as a result most British mills adopted them. American mills generally made their blankets slightly smaller and lighter than equivalently marked English-made point blankets. While a larger point blanket will naturally weigh more than a smaller one, the actual weight per square yard of blanket cloth would be the same for each blanket size *as long as they are from the same mill and of the same grade*. From time to time various grades of blankets were available and blankets of the same dimensions and thus the same number of points were produced in both heavy and light grades. For instance during World War I HBC marketed lighter weight point blankets in grey and brown colours along with their standard line of colours in the traditional weight cloth

Hudson's Bay Blankets
Sizes c. 1935



The chart shows the standard sizes and weights for various point blankets marketed by the Hudson's Bay Company during the mid 1930s.

From <http://www.pointblankets.com/index.html>



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What Point Blankets were Trapper's buying From the Trade Ledgers

The trade ledgers indicate that most trapper's blankets, purchase were 2 1/2 or 3 point blankets

But this becomes more complicated when you study some of the primary historical sources, (such as Osborne Russell's personal purchases) the 2 1/2 and 3 point blankets could be purchased as a "pair". This means one large blanket still woven together as it was shipped from the factory. A 2 1/2 point pair could be completely different dimension and a much larger area single blanket than one would picture using today's point-bar designation.

Ledgers don't show trappers purchasing 5 or 6 point blankets, if the trapper purchase a blanket pair he could have had a very large blanket that was proportional much longer and narrower than today's 5 or 6 point blankets.

Many of the early suppliers East of the Mississippi considered the

3 point blanket (3 1/2 point - available today) as a standard stock item for trade stores in white with black "strips", white with blue "strips", white with grey-pale blue "strips" (these are really rare and issued for only a few years around 1800),

4 points were special order, white with black "shoots" were special order also, per Charles Hanson.

From
<http://hrd7.tripod.com/hbc/hbc.html>

Hudson's Bay Company Point Blankets Colours

Here are the colors available and the time periods manufactured.

1779 until after WW II.

White Body , Blue Strip
White Body , Black Strip
most typical colors found in fur trade

1780

Hudson's Bay did not offer "point" blankets until 1780

1786

White Body , Red / Pink Strip replaced unpointed blankets

1799

the Hudson's Bay Company post at Albany River ordered "Pointed Blankets to be striped Red, Blue, Green & Yellow"

circa 1800s - present

Solid Red body with black stripe

circa 1810 - 1830

White Body , Pale Blue Strip
"pale grey-blue" 3-1/2 pt only

circa 1810 - 1850

White Body , Green Strip
"dark green" various orders

circa 1810 - 1850

White Body , Yellow Strip
various orders

before 1820 - ref as early as 1762 and possibly earlier

White body – Multiple Stripe Blanket – Pale Blue, Red, Pale Blue, Red Strips

circa 1820-pre., French color

Solid indigo blue body with black stripe

1831 York Factory ordered "fine HB striped 3-1/2 blue, green, red & yellow stripes 100,"

1830s multiple stripe - 1830s comb.

White body – Multiple Stripe Blanket – Red, Pale Blue, Red Strips

1830

the Columbia district, which included most of HBC's Northwest Coast and it's beaver trapping brigades, ordered "Blankets-Fine HB striped, Blue, Green, Red and yellow stripes.

circa 1830s-present

Solid "gentianella" a medium blue body with black stripe

circa 1830s-1870s

Solid Light Blue body with black stripe

circa 1834-present American Fur Company

Solid Brown body with black stripe

1840s-1850s multiple stripe - 1840s-50s comb.

White body – Multiple Stripe Blanket – Pale Blue, Red, Pale Blue, Strips

1850 and used today Hudson's Bay Company

White Body – Multiple Stripe Blanket - Black, Yellow, Red and Green Strips

1850s old French color

Solid Green body with black stripe

Labels didn't come into being used on Blankets until **1890**

From

<http://hrd7.tripod.com/hbc/hbc.html>

What Blankets Cost

Circumstances such as local demand, transportation costs, amount of competition and other factors mean that the actual cost of a blanket at any one time at a post needs to be determined using account books and standards of trade. For example, the prices at Moose Factory in 1784 were

1 made beaver for a 1 point blanket,
2 made beaver for a 1 1/2 point blanket,
2 1/2 made beaver for a 2 point blanket,
3 made beaver for a 2 1/2 point blanket
and 4 made beaver for a 3 point blanket.
Still the equation of 1 point per 1 made beaver is a good rough guide to price .

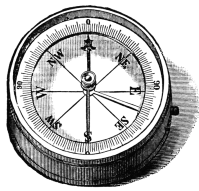


Here is a Rindisbacher sketch from the Red River Settlements of the 1820s.

Note the frock coats and capotes.

Additionally we can see a toque, a top hat, a clerk's cap and a balamoral.

There also appear to be cloth pants, leggings, and leather pants, and all seem to be wearing pucker-toe moccasins and sashes.



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Capotes

Osborne Russell says a trapper's dress is in part ...*a coat made of blanket* (*Journal of a Trapper*, 1955. MJF Books, NY). Ferris, in his *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, says that ...*the clothing of the hunters themselves, is generally made of prepared skins, though most of them wear blanket "capotes," (overcoats),...*

Then William Drummond Stewart buys in St. Louis an ...*overcoat of white blanket with a hood...* (Edward Warren. 1854. Mountain Press, 1986, Missoula, MT).

The Canadians are a swarthy people, and low in stature; their dress consists of...when the weather is cold, a blanket coat, which they fasten around them with a worsted sash. They mostly wear a woolen cap, but in cold weather a fur one... (Anburey, T. 1969. Travels Through the Interior Parts of America in a Series of Letters by an Officer. Two Volumes. New York: New York Times and Arno Press)

Capotes are probably one of the most typical styles of common coats seen from Canada and ...*the voyageurs and fur trade companies spread the use of the capot to the four corners of the North American continent, and nobody should be surprised to find references to capots coming from New Mexico or Hudson's Bay* (F. Back, 1991. The Canadian Capot (Capote) Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly, Vol. 27, No. 3).

This style of coat goes back to a sailor's or fisherman's coat from the 1600s onward. It was seen as the most common of all coats for the Canadians and is also one of the most practical garments for cold weather. These are sometimes referred to a blanket coats, but more commonly are made from blanketing wool rather than an actual blanket, although some were made from blankets. Capotes are easy to make and several patterns are available. Again, when you examine the records, inventories and limited extant examples only a very limited number of capotes were made from blankets

Blankets in the late 18th and early 19th century were both expensive, and more useful as a blanket than as a garment. In fact capotes could be cheaper than the blankets that had to be cut up. It would be rare that a capote could be made from a single 3 point blanket, the larger size of blankets usually sold during the fur trade. Using a single 3 point blanket would be especially so for us much larger 21st century men. However there will be large enough scraps left, from cutting up two blankets, to make moccasin liners, mittens, etc. Sashes or belts are used to secure the capotes closed and there is no documentation for sashes or strips cut from blanket material as we often see today.

In 1837, pairs of white, scarlet and green 3 point blankets were selling for \$8 each and 3 point blue blankets for \$7. In the same inventory blue blanket capotes were \$8 and green blanket capotes were \$7 and others for as little as \$6.75. Looks like it is cheaper to buy a capote than to cut up blankets. From an Invoice of Sundry Merchandise furnished Rocky Mountain Outfit 1837 under charge of Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Co <http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/mtman/bizrecs.html>.

However, there would be many times when a guys only got blankets and no wool material to cut into a coat.

In 1834, the naturalists John Townsend and Thomas Nuttall arrive in St. Louis to accompany Captain Wyeth west to the Columbia River. Wyeth meets them and immediately takes them to town to get them outfitted. In Townsends diary/field notes he says that Wyeth selected for each of them, ...*an enormous over-coat made of green flannel*.

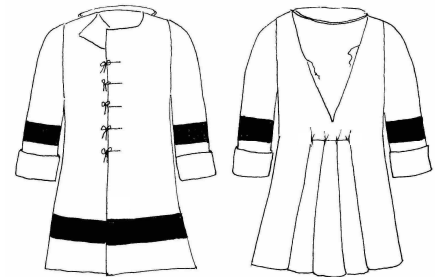
However in the published book of his journey Townsend says he [Wyeth] had them purchase ...*enormous overcoats, made of green blankets...*

So are they flannel or blankets? It may be that they were made of wool flannel or wool blanketing cloth as were seen in blankets. Being that they were probably tailor made in St. Louis is it doubtful that they were cutting up blankets here,

as it would be much more expensive to do so. It may be that the terms "blanket coat" or "blanket capote" was the common term for these coats, whether they were made from blankets or not.

A blanket, as we all know, absorbs water, stays warm when wet and is a good insulator but is not a particularly effective as a wind breaker. However, if it is covered with or lined with a tighter and less lofty fabric it is much more effective in wind. The majority of capotes in the inventories were cut from melton and other fabrics which had the ability to cut the wind and shed moisture. Duffle cloth would be a good option for a capote, or a lined melton cloth. Duffle is tighter than blanketing, and is certainly less expensive than cutting up new blankets.

Linings were often of linen, gabardine, satinette, or other tight weave materials. Except for some of the trapper made capotes from the field, sketches, paintings and extant capotes seem to be well tailored garments and not simple box tubes. Many of the trade forts had tailors or Indian women sewing garments for them and of course Indian women were adept at coping the pattern of a worn out coat into a new wool or leather coat of Euro-American style.



Canadian Indian
- 1839 sketch
from Chaplin

**From : Coats of the Fur Trade By
Gene Hickman**

www.manuellisaparty.com/articles/pfd/s/Coats1.pdf