



Cockade

A cockade is a decorative knot of ribbons or a circular or oval emblem, typically made in distinctive colors and worn on a hat or cap. Throughout history, this small but highly visible

accessory has served practical, symbolic, and political purposes. The term "cockade" comes from the French *cocarde*, derived from the Old French *coquarde*, the feminine form of *coquard*, meaning vain or arrogant. That word, in turn, stems from *coc* (cock), an imitative reference that likely evoked pride or bold display. The earliest documented use of the word dates to 1709, although the object itself predates that reference by several centuries.

Cockades first appeared in Europe during the 15th century, when they were adopted by armies of emerging European states. Their primary function was straightforward but crucial: to identify the nationality or allegiance of soldiers on the battlefield. In an era when standardized military uniforms were not yet common, cockades offered a simple visual solution for distinguishing allies from enemies amid the confusion of combat. These early military cockades were inspired by practices already familiar from the Late Middle Ages. Knights in warfare and in tournaments often wore colored bands or ribbons to mark their loyalties and differentiate themselves from opponents and comrades alike. Cockades effectively continued this tradition in a more compact and standardized form.

Over time, the cockade's role expanded beyond the battlefield. By the 18th and 19th centuries, it had become a powerful revolutionary symbol, closely associated with political upheaval and popular insurrection. Its effectiveness lay in its visibility and versatility. A cockade could be easily seen, allowing the wearer to openly declare political sympathies or ideological commitments. At the same time, unlike a flag or banner, it could be discreetly concealed when circumstances demanded caution. This combination made the cockade an ideal emblem during periods of unrest, when public displays of allegiance could be both empowering and dangerous.

One notable example of the cockade's use comes from the American Revolutionary War. Prior to the Battle of Long Island, General George Washington issued general orders on August 20, 1776, outlining the use of cockades within the Continental Army. At that early stage of the conflict, the army consisted largely of

militia members who still wore civilian clothing, making it difficult to distinguish officers from enlisted men. Washington acknowledged this problem, noting that the lack of uniforms created "many inconveniences," and called for an immediate badge of distinction. According to his orders, field officers were to wear pink cockades, captains white or buff ones, and subaltern officers green cockades attached to their headgear.

The symbolism of the cockade continued to evolve during the war. On July 19, 1780, officers were instructed to adopt white and black cockades, featuring a black background with white relief. This design symbolized the anticipated union between the French and American forces. In 1783, this emblem was officially named the "Union Cockade" and designated to be worn on the left breast, marking both military identity and political alliance. Through such uses, the cockade secured its place as a small but potent symbol in military and revolutionary history.



Felt tricorne hat, with red silk cockade documented to have belonged to an individual named Hartshorne, from Reading, MA.